

# Behold the Fig Tree

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On that first Palm Sunday, Jesus had entered into Jerusalem, riding on the back of a donkey, with the people shouting, "Hosanna!" According to Mark 11:11, "...Jesus entered into Jerusalem, and into the temple: and when he had looked round about upon all things, and now the eventide was come, he went out unto Bethany with the twelve."



Jesus and His disciples spent the night in Bethany in the house of His friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (whom Jesus had previously raised from the dead). Bethany was a small village located on the southeastern slope of the Mount of Olives about 2 miles from Jerusalem. The large number of date trees growing in the area led itself to the name of the village, Bethany, the House of Dates.

The next morning, Jesus and His disciples set off again for Jerusalem. After walking 20 minutes or so they found themselves in the vicinity of Bethphage, about halfway to Jerusalem. Bethphage, meaning the House of Figs, was known for the many fig trees in the area. Consequently, it is not surprising that Jesus and His disciples might have thought it would be nice to find a few ripe figs to munch on as they continued on their way to Jerusalem.

Now, this is where the account becomes somewhat difficult to understand. Consider Mark 11:12-14, and 20-21:

*<sup>12</sup>And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry: <sup>13</sup>And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. <sup>14</sup>And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it. <sup>20</sup>...And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. <sup>21</sup>And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.*

We see that Jesus was hungry and saw the fig tree in the distance as they were walking. That much is easy to understand. The next statement, however, becomes problematic when you remember that Jesus is God manifest in the flesh. Mark writes, "And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves..." This statement may seem simple enough, that is, until we realize that the word "haply" means "by chance" or "perhaps." Jesus would never have been subject to something being simply by chance. As God, He would have known if there was fruit on the tree or not before ever seeing the tree. Consequently, Jesus was not surprised or taken aback to find no fruit, only leaves, on the tree.

Mark further complicates things in his next statement saying, "...for the time of figs was not yet." Because of this, many, myself included, have erroneously assumed that this statement means that figs would have not been in season yet and there should have been no expectation on anyone's part to find figs at that time. In other words, it would have been like seeing an apple tree in the spring with leaves on it and wondering if, by chance, there might be some apples on the tree ready for eating. But this was not the case. Figs were in fact expected to be found around the time of Passover. What Mark was referring to was the time for harvesting figs, which was not yet. They were still ripening on the trees and the harvest generally occurred shortly after Passover. However, as in the case of apples and many other fruits, some figs may have ripened early, making the hope that some ripe figs might haply be found a reasonable hope.

Unfortunately, that brings us back to the previous problem of Jesus, being God, knowing that there were no fruits at all on the tree, let alone any ripe ones. Surely Jesus was not being cranky or ill-tempered here. So then, we have to ask, why did Jesus go to the fig tree to see if there was any fruit on it, knowing that it was without fruit, and then curse the tree for being fruitless so that it dried up and withered away? And why did God ensure that both Matthew and Mark recorded this incident in their Gospels? Surely, there was a reason because, as Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

*<sup>16</sup>All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: <sup>17</sup>That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.*

Let's take a closer look at this incident, then, to see what God is trying to tell us.

First, consider the fruiting nature of the fig tree. Fruits typically begin to form early in the spring before the leaves appear on the previous year's growth and then again on the new growth later in the summer. However, fig trees are a bit temperamental when it comes to producing fruit. To begin with, they typically do not bear fruit until they are about 3-4 years old. Then, when they do begin bearing fruit, any number of conditions, such as too much or too little water, a sudden cold snap, or even too much nitrogen in the soil, can cause them to either stop bearing fruit or cast their fruits before they ripen. Of course, since they often fruit twice in one season, even though they may lose the early spring fruits, they may yet bare the later summer fruits.

With that in mind, let's also consider that the fig tree in the Bible often symbolizes Israel as a nation. Knowing that we can begin to unlock what God is revealing through this incident. Remember, Jesus had spent about three and a half years ministering to Israel, long enough for a fig tree to bear fruit. Approaching Jerusalem, the heart of the Jewish nation, Jesus could see the outward religious trappings and pageantry surrounding the Temple, the priests, and the many visitors on display as Passover approached. The outward appearance of spirituality, much like the leaves on the fig tree, no doubt held out the tantalizing possibility of spiritual fruit.

Jesus would have haply found the nation bearing fruit but, alas, like the fig tree, it bore no fruit. But then again, it was not yet time for the nation of Israel to bear fruit. Instead, Jesus was shortly to be arrested, tried, and crucified.

Consequently, just as Jesus found no fruit on the fig tree and cursed it so that it withered away, Israel was also cursed for bearing no fruit either. Like the fig tree, Israel soon withered away and ceased to be a nation. Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple in 70 AD and then drove the Jews out of the land in

135 AD, renaming Judea as Palaestina and Jerusalem as Aelia Capitolina. Having rejected their Messiah, Israel was doomed from henceforth to bear no fruit.

However, an interesting prophecy occurs in Mark 13:28-30, in the form of a parable, where Jesus says:

*<sup>28</sup>Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near: <sup>29</sup>So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is nigh, even at the doors. <sup>30</sup>Verily I say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done.*

Matthew and Luke also record this same prophecy in their Gospels. And, in all three cases, the parable follows a prophetic outline of the last days, detailing the events of the Tribulation and the triumphant return of Jesus Christ at its conclusion. In each case, the fig tree is also described as leafing out in the spring with the promise of summer being near at hand. They also note that the generation that sees the fig tree put forth leaves would also see the completion of the events leading to the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom with Jesus Christ reigning over all the world from Jerusalem.

This corresponds to Daniel's prophecy of 70 weeks of years, with the last seven years being the Tribulation in Daniel 9. Daniel gives us the angels prophetic outline of Israel's history in verses 24-27. In verse 24 he writes that the purpose of the prophesied events is "...to finish the transgression, and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision and prophecy, and to anoint the most Holy." In other words, to deal with Israel's sin and to establish the Millennial Kingdom.

Now, bringing these prophecies together with the cursing of the fig tree, we can better understand why Jesus cursed the fig tree. Jesus had spent some three and a half years ministering to Israel and could have reasonably expected the nation to bear some early fruit. Instead, Israel rejected Jesus and crucified Him. So, like the fig tree, which bore no early fruit, Israel was then likewise cut off and died. However, unlike the fig tree, Israel is destined to live again in the latter days where it will have opportunity to bear the later summer fruit as they finally embrace Jesus Christ as their Messiah and King, ushering in the Millennial Kingdom.

That, of course leads us to the question of when will these prophecies be fulfilled? Well, while we cannot set an exact day and time, we can get a sense of the general timing from Luke's recording of the fig tree prophecy in Luke 21:29-32:

*<sup>29</sup>And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; <sup>30</sup>When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now nigh at hand. <sup>31</sup>So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. <sup>32</sup>Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled.*

On May 14, 1948, something unprecedented in human history occurred. Israel, which had ceased to be a nation in 135 AD suddenly became alive again. After being dead for nearly 2000 years, the bare branches of the fig tree began to shoot forth leaves, promising fruit in the summer.

What makes Luke's record of this prophecy especially interesting is that it says, "Behold the fig tree, and all the trees". Matthew and Mark mention only the fig tree. That led me to look for any other nations, represented by trees, that became sovereign nations around the same time that Israel did. I found that

Lebanon, represented by the cedars of Lebanon, became a sovereign nation on November 22, 1943. Syria, represented by the oaks of Bashan, became a sovereign nation on October 24, 1945. Intrigued, I investigated further and found that all the nations around Israel, even those not necessarily represented by trees, also became sovereign nations around the same time: Egypt on March 22, 1946, Jordan on February 28, 1922, Iraq on October 3, 1932, and Saudia Arabia on September 23, 1932.

In other words, not just the fig tree (Israel), but all the trees in the Middle East appear to have put forth their leaves and become independent nations during the early to mid-1900's. Consequently, the generation that saw these events occur, according to the words of Jesus Christ, "...shall not pass away, till all be fulfilled." "All be fulfilled" means exactly that. The Tribulation has ended, Israel's sin has been dealt with, and the Millennial Kingdom with Jesus Christ on the Throne has begun.

Of course, we do not know how long is meant by a generation. Some have suggested 40 years, others 70-80. However, since we are not in the Millennial Kingdom, and the Tribulation has not started yet, we can rule out those suggestions. So, perhaps, the simplest explanation is the best. It would seem that Jesus is saying that at least some of the people who were alive to see Israel and the surrounding nations become sovereign nations would be alive to see the Millennial Kingdom established as well.

In case you haven't noticed that generation is not getting any younger. Therefore, it might be wise to make sure that your heart is right with God and your reservations are in order for your place in God's coming Kingdom. The window is quickly closing.

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