

Matthew 21:18-19

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In the morning after Jesus's triumphal entry, Jesus travels back to Jerusalem from where He spent the night in Bethany. He becomes hungry and sees a fig tree in bloom alongside the road. Hoping to find something to eat, He walks up to it. When He does not find any fruit, Jesus curses the fig tree and it withers, instantly.

The parallel Gospel account of this event is Mark 11:12-14, and a similar teaching is found in Luke 13:6-9.

The next day Jesus returned *to the city* with His disciples. Matthew reported that the day before, *Jesus* had triumphantly entered the city as the Messiah and Passover Lamb (Matthew 21:6-11) and gone to the Temple and drove out the money changers (Matthew 21:13). He had also conducted miracles of healing there (Matthew 21:14), and confronted the chief priests (Matthew 21:15-16) before leaving the city to spend the night in Bethany (Matthew 21:17). To say it had been a consequential day is an understatement.

Now in the morning He returned *to* Jerusalem from the village of Bethany. In Hebrew, Bethany could mean either “house of figs” or “house of the poor.” “Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off” (John 11:18). From Bethany there were two routes one could travel *to* Jerusalem. One was to take the direct road that was to the south of the Mount of Olives along the main highway. This was the so-called “Jericho Road” because it ran between the cities of Jerusalem and Jericho. The other way to get *to* Jerusalem from Bethany was for Jesus to retrace the path *He* took the day before during His triumphal entry (Matthew 21:1). This was by way of the village of Bethphage which was located to the north of the Mount of Olives. Bethphage means “house of unripe figs.” The Gospel writers do not record which of these paths Jesus took. See map in Maps Section.

But Matthew and Mark both report that *when He was returning to the city* that Jesus *became hungry* (Mark 11:12). His hunger serves as another reminder that even though Jesus was God, He was also human. And as a human, he experienced bodily limitations such as a need for food and rest—just like we do.

As he traveled, Jesus saw *a lone fig tree by the road*. When ripe, *the fruit* of fig trees is wonderfully sweet and delicious (1 Samuel 25:18; Song of Solomon 2:13). The fact that *the fig tree* was by itself, indicates that it did not belong to anyone's garden or orchard. Any *fruit* that it produced would be free to any takers. Jesus *came to it*, hoping to find figs to eat, but instead *He found nothing on it except leaves*. *The fig tree's leaves* gave it a tantalizing appearance for someone who was *hungry*. But there was no *fruit* on *the tree*. Mark observed “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13). Passover occurred in mid-spring. Figs were ripe in summer and early fall. It is interesting to consider that this *lone fig tree* was possibly located near the village of Bethphage—“the house of unripe figs”.

What Jesus did next seemed highly unusual. *He spoke to the fig tree and said, “No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you.”* Matthew then reported *at once the fig tree withered.* This is the only recorded miracle of Jesus that was a curse. It is interesting to consider that incident possibly occurred near the village of Bethphage—“the house of unripe figs.”

What did Jesus mean by this harsh action?

The fig tree was symbolic of the nation of Israel. Jesus’s curse represented His disappointment in His people. The withering of *the tree* depicted what was about to happen to the nation of Israel as a consequence of its fruitlessness. They were going to reject the Messiah God sent to deliver them. As a consequence for their rejection, they would suffer the destruction of Jerusalem and another season of exile.

This *fig tree* represented Israel.

Throughout the Old Testament, and especially in its prophetic literature, *a fig tree* and its *fruit* were frequently used as symbols for the nation of Israel. Sometimes *fig trees* were used to portray hopeful images of Israel’s future or depictions of what she should be like, as in Joel 2:22 and Micah 4:4. More often *fig trees* served as unflattering representations of Israel, as in Isaiah 28:3-4, Jeremiah 8:13, 29:17, Hosea 9:10-17, and Micah 7:1-6.

In Jeremiah 24, figs were used as both positive and negative symbols for Israel. In this passage a basket of first-ripe, good figs represented the captives to Babylon (Jeremiah 24:4-7). And the rotten, inedible bad figs represented the wicked king Zedekiah and his officials and those who remained with him (Jeremiah 24:8-10). The good figs were “very good” and the bad figs were “very bad” (Jeremiah 24:3). Jeremiah’s vision of the fig baskets is similar to Jesus’s parables of “the wheat and the tares” (Matthew 13:24-30; Matthew 13:36-43) and “the dragnet” (Matthew 13:47-50).

Jesus’s curse of *the fig tree* was an expression of His disappointment in Israel’s lack of *fruit*.

The fig tree was “in leaf.” And its *leaves* gave it an appearance of fruitfulness, but it was barren. In Mark’s account *the tree* was “*nothing but leaves*” (Mark 11:13). Like the *fig leaves* that Adam and Eve used to cover their nakedness (Genesis 3:7), so too was Israel’s righteousness *only leaves* and no *fruit*. This disappointing *fig tree* was emblematic of how the Pharisees were hypocritical frauds who led the people astray (23:13-15; 23:23-28). They looked good, but on closer inspection provided no spiritual nourishment.

It is likely no coincidence that Matthew recorded the curse of *the fig tree* just after *Jesus* drove out the money changers and censured the Sadducees in the temple (Matthew 21:12-13). Similarly, Mark records it just before his account of the temple cleansing (Mark 11:12-20). This indicates an association in both Gospel writers’ minds between the curse of the fig tree, the cleansing of the temple, and the censure of the Sadducees.

Jesus could empathize with the prophet Micah when *He* saw the emptiness of Israel: “there is not a cluster of grapes to eat, or a first-ripe *fig* which I crave” (Micah 7:1).

The miraculous withering of *the tree* depicted what was about to happen to the nation of Israel as a consequence of its fruitlessness.

The purpose of a *fig tree* is to produce figs. If a *fig tree* produces no *fruit*, it is useless. Though this tree's leaves signaled that it was productive, in reality it was not. When *Jesus said to the tree*, "*No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you*," He revealed *the fig tree's* emptiness for what it was. *And at once the tree withered.*

This miraculous withering is a graphic picture of what the Lord declared to the prophet Jeremiah about the kingdom of Judah six centuries earlier. This prophecy of Jeremiah was fulfilled when Judah (southern Israel) was exiled to Babylon for its unfaithfulness (1 Chronicles 9:1).

“I will surely snatch them away,’ declares the Lord;
‘There will be no grapes on the vine
And no figs on the fig tree,
And the leaf will wither;
And what I have given them will pass away.’”
(Jeremiah 8:13)

Jesus's cursing of the fig tree is a pictorial version of the prophecy of Jeremiah.

Jesus's cursing of the fig tree was also reminiscent of Jesus's short parable of the barren *fig tree*:

“A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’ And he answered and said to him, ‘Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.’”
(Luke 13:6-9)

The main point of Jeremiah's prophecy, *Jesus's* parable, and His withering of *the fig tree* all foretell of how God's patience with Israel, giving them more than ample time to repent is about to end. God's wrathful judgment is about to unmistakably fall upon unrepentant Israel. He has given them many opportunities. After Jesus is resurrected and ascends, God will give Israel yet another opportunity (Acts 3:19-21). But with that final rejection, Israel's opportunity to enjoy the *fruit* of entering His kingdom will be taken from them (Matthew 21:43). Once this happens, Israel, like this accursed *fig tree*, *shall suddenly no longer ever have any fruit* again.

The word translated “*ever*” is the Greek word “*aion*” which the Young's Literal Translation generally translates as “to the age.” The context determines what age, and whether it is the beginning or end of the age. The idea here is that Israel will no longer flourish as a nation under God's leadership until the end of the current age. Paul refers to this as the time when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in,” at which time “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:25-26). This might overlap or be a part of the time when Jesus will set up His reign on the current earth as Israel's ruling Messiah (Revelation 20:1-10).

Within a generation of this incident of Jesus cursing the fig tree, Roman armies crushed Israel and destroyed the temple (70 A.D.). Sixty-five years after that, the Emperor Hadrian banished the Jews from their homeland and renamed the province of Judea “Philistine Land.” The Latin name for “Philistine Land” was “Palestine” (135 A.D.) Hadrian did this out of extreme dislike for the Jews. The Jews would not have a recognized homeland for another eighteen-hundred years, when the modern nation of Israel was formed in 1948. The rebirth of Israel as a nation could signal the beginning of a time when the “fullness of the Gentiles” will come to pass.

In spite of Israel’s chastisement, all is not lost. Israel, like this *fig tree*, will suffer bitterly for its fruitlessness, but God will never abandon His people. *He* will redeem Israel (Romans 11:1; 11:26). This promise was first foretold by Moses (Deuteronomy 30:1-10) and was later echoed by the prophet Joel (Joel 2:18-27). God promises Israel that one day, “*the fig tree* and the vine will have yielded in full.” This promise remains to be fulfilled in the future, as of this writing.

Though Jesus’s interaction with this fruitless *fig tree* primarily concerned Israel, there is also a lesson in it for New Testament believers. We should remember that God cares about authentic righteousness that is produced through faith in Him. *He* is disappointed by self-righteousness. Like this *fig tree*, we may appear to be ‘in-leaf’ to others—even to ourselves—but God craves not our *leaves*, but our “first-ripe *fruit*” (Micah 7:1). *He* will inspect us to see if we bear good *fruit*, and reward us according to our deeds (Romans 14:12; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

As with Israel, God will never reject those who are His children (Romans 8:16-17a). But God’s kingdom rewards will be given to those who are faithful to His kingdom principles (Romans 8:17b; Revelation 3:21). All it takes to become a child of God is to have enough faith to look at Jesus raised on the cross, hoping to be delivered from the poisonous venom of sin (John 3:14-15). To gain the rewards of the kingdom requires living faithfully according to the precepts of the kingdom.

As an aside, Mark also records Jesus’s cursing of *the fig tree* (Mark 11:12-14). Both Matthew and Mark record a conversation between Jesus and His disciples about the miraculous withering that resulted from His curse (Matthew 21:20-22; Mark 11:19-26). But their two accounts differ.

- Both report that Jesus cursed *the fig tree* the day after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem on His way back *to the city* (Matthew 21:18-19; Mark 11:12-14).
- Mark does not describe the exact moment *the fig tree withered*, but Matthew does.
- Mark only comments on its effect later (Mark 11:20), while Matthew shares that *the fig tree withered at once* (Matthew 21:19).
- The follow up conversation in Mark’s gospel is reported to have taken place in the evening on the return journey after the day’s events when Peter observed and pointed out to Jesus that “*the fig tree* which you cursed has *withered*” (Mark 11:21). While in Matthew’s gospel, the recorded discussion immediately follows the miracle, and on the way *to the cit*

The apparent differences in these accounts may be harmonized in at least two ways.

- Jesus cursed *the fig tree in the morning* on the way *to* *It* instantly *withered* and at least some of the disciples saw this, but Mark chose not to mention this fact. At least some of those disciples discussed how this happened with Jesus on the way *to* Jerusalem as reported by Matthew. Then on the way back from *the city* Peter (who may not have been walking next to *Jesus* that *morning*, but who probably heard about what happened) pointed out to Jesus that *the fig tree* was still *withered*. Jesus then told Peter what *He* said earlier that *morning* to the disciples. Matthew chose not to mention this second conversation. (The source of Mark's gospel is generally believed to be Peter).
- Either Matthew or Mark opted to thematically arrange the order of events in their gospel accounts instead of following a strict chronological order.

Biblical text

21:18-19 Now in the morning, when He was returning to the city, He became hungry. Seeing a lone fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it except leaves only; and He said to it, "No longer shall there ever be any fruit from you." And at once the fig tree withered.