

The Cursed Tree

by Dan Elmore

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Poet Edgar A. Guest once wrote a poem entitled "The Dead Oak Tree":

An oak tree died the other day
Despite my constant care;
Now men must carry it away
And leave my garden bare.

It came to leaf in early spring,
To live 'twas guaranteed;
Man is so vain and proud a thing,
He vaunted God, indeed.

For how can mortal guarantee
The breath of life, and say
That he can keep within a tree
What God may take away?

It cannot be that man can sense,
As do the sun and rain,
What living trees experience
Of loneliness and pain.

I think they never heard it sigh,
Nor ever dreamed a tree
Could, broken-hearted, pine and die,
Who wrote that guarantee.

Mr. Guest's thoughtful poem brings to mind an incident in the life of Jesus Christ, in which He cursed a fig tree that had not borne fruit. This scene occurred quite late in His ministry, just after His triumphal entry into Jerusalem before His final Passover. Matthew 21:18-19 relates what happened:

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, "Let no fruit grow on you ever again." Immediately the fig tree withered away.

Mark also records this story, providing more detail:

Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it. (Mark 11:12-14)

Many readers of God's Word have found this incident to be very disturbing, and it has been a stumblingblock to more than a few. The idea that Jesus would become angry and curse this tree to wither and die—just because it had no figs at a time when figs were not even in season—seems completely unreasonable to a great many people.

But surely there is more to the story. The Jesus we know from the rest of the gospels is not One who, in a fit of temper, would do something so impulsive and cruel. He is the same Man who healed many people suffering from disease and demon possession throughout His ministry. He took little children in His arms and blessed them (Mark 10:16). He let the woman caught in adultery go with only a warning to repent (John 8:11). He wept at Lazarus' tomb (John 11:35) and grieved over Jerusalem's unwillingness to seek God's help (Matthew 23:37). He even asked God to forgive those who put Him to death (Luke 23:34)!

Do these examples portray a Man who would unjustly curse an insensate tree to death? Was Jesus' cursing of the fig tree an unreasonable act?

A Fruitless Tree

Over the years, we have come to learn that God put everything in the Bible for a purpose. We are to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4). Nothing is there that has not been inspired! The apostle Paul writes in II Timothy 3:15-17:

[T]he Holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

In addition, as we saw, Jesus Christ was no egomaniacal, out-of-control hothead who went about "shooting from the hip" and speaking His mind whenever it pleased Him. He was thoughtful and caring, willing to help those who needed it, and even those who deserved justice He treated with mercy.

To the contrary, His purpose was not to please Himself but to follow God's will in every act and word. He says of Himself in John 6:38, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." He says something very similar in John 5:30, "I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me."

Therefore, we know what happened on the road from Bethany to Jerusalem was not a reaction from disappointment or anger, but it was apparently God's will for Him to curse the tree. God inspired it to be included in the Scriptures for our edification.

Before we progress any further, we need to address this question: Why would a fig tree fail to bear fruit? This gets to the heart of the matter of why Jesus thought it necessary to curse the tree, since both records of this incident give the tree's lack of fruit as the reason for Jesus' action against it.

A website called GardeningKnowHow.com features an article titled "Why a Fig Tree Is Not Producing Fruit" by Heather Rhoades. She provides several reasons:

The most common reason for a fig tree not producing fruit is simply its age. Trees, like animals, need to reach a certain maturity before they can produce offspring. Fruit is how a fig tree creates seeds. If the fig tree is not old enough to produce seeds, it will also not produce fruit.

Typically, a fig tree will not fruit until it reaches 2 years old, but it can take some trees as long as six years to reach the right maturity. . . .

Another common reason that a fig tree is not producing figs is because of too much nitrogen. This commonly happens when you are using a fertilizer that is too high in nitrogen. Nitrogen causes the plant to have lush growth in leaves and branches, but very little if any fruit. . . .

If a fig tree is suffering from water stress caused by either too little or too much water, this can cause it to stop producing figs or never start producing, if it is a younger tree. Water stress will send the tree into a survival mode and the fig tree will simply not have the energy needed to invest in making fruit. . . .

These are the most common reasons that fig trees will not make fig fruit. There are many other less common reasons that are mostly tied to the nutrients in the soil. (<http://www.gardeningknowhow.com/fruit-gardening/fig-tree-is-producing-fruit.htm>)

Even if the tree was suffering from one of these problems, why curse the fig tree? We can hardly fault the tree, since it was merely growing in accordance with the instructions God had placed in its DNA at creation.

Some Relevant Information

The various commentaries provide a wealth of additional information to help us better understand this event, as the Bible leaves out a great deal that its authors expected their contemporary readers to know. With many years and thousands of miles of geography between us and the area of Jerusalem in AD 31, it behooves us to seek out expert help in this matter. With these added pieces of information, we can understand that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree was reasonable and an example for us.

Gill's *Exposition of the Entire Bible* explains that the tree that Jesus cursed was a peculiar fig tree among the many that could be found in the vicinity of the Mount of Olives. There were so many fig trees in that area that it was known as Bethpage—"House of Figs." This particular tree was unique because of the abundance of leaves—an indication of abundant fruit—but it had none. It was all show.

Adam Clarke's commentary on Mark 11:13 points out that the phrase "the time of figs was not yet" would be better translated to emphasize that the time for *gathering* figs had not yet come. Clarke cites a similar phrase in Psalm 1:3 as support. He also indicates that the climate in the area of Jerusalem was such that figs could be found throughout the year, especially in March and April, making it not unreasonable to expect to find fruit then. However, figs are not usually harvested until after Passover—all the more reason to expect to find some on this tree.

Clarke further contends that this fig tree was supposed to represent the state of the Jewish people—"that they professed the true religion and considered themselves the special people of God—but were only hypocrites having nothing of religion but the profession—an abundance of leaves but no fruit." Thus, he continues, "Jesus' cursing of the fig tree was intended as a warning of what was to come in the absence of repentance; the total destruction and final ruin of the Jewish state at the hands of the Romans."

Clarke concludes that Jesus did not curse the fig tree out of resentment for disappointing Him by not having any fruit, but to emphasize to His disciples just how devastating God's wrath would be on the Jews, "who had now nearly filled up the measure of their iniquity." Further, it is an object lesson to everyone that God expects us to bear the fruit of righteousness, showing us the consequences of failing in that task.

Matthew Henry echoes this last lesson in his comment on Mark 11:13:

Christ was willing to make an example of it, not to the *trees*, but to the *men*, of that generation, and therefore cursed it with that curse which is the reverse of the first blessing, *Be fruitful*; he said unto it, *Never let any man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever!*

These relevant facts inform us it was not a case that Jesus was annoyed and cursed the fig tree out of anger or disappointment as many have supposed. In fact, it was not an unreasonable act at all. No, the cursing of the fig tree turns out to be an act of God performed as a witness—like all the object lessons Jesus performed throughout His ministry. It was a stern warning to all who would fail to bear the fruit of righteousness, including—perhaps especially—us today!

The apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 10:11, "Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come." Jesus was following this principle in giving us an illustration of His words in Matthew 7:19, "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (see also John 15:6). The cursing of the fig tree is a pointed exhortation from our Savior not to be found fruitless at His appearing because the dreaded Lake of Fire awaits those who taste of "the heavenly gift" of God and failing to grow, fall away (see Hebrews 6:4-6; Revelation 20:15; 21:8).

Basil, a fourth-century theologian, wrote in part, "A tree is known by its fruit; a man by his deeds. . . ." The deeds—the fruit—that God wants to see are the expressions of His Spirit working in us as we interact with others (Galatians 5:22-23). As Christ Himself instructs us, "By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples" (John 15:8).

This is what the Christian life is all about: growing and producing fruit that glorifies God. Thanks to that fig tree on the way to Jerusalem, we have a vivid example to keep us on the straight and narrow path to the Kingdom of God.