

# Parable Of The Barren Fig Tree

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The problem of human suffering and sin raises serious questions, and in His reply to such a question, Jesus' speaks of repentance and judgment (Luke 13:1-5). He continues with the Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (verses 6-9), which refers to tragedy among the Galileans (verse 1). History fails to record the exact incident, but the revolutionary activities of that time made anything possible. Galileans, says Josephus, were especially susceptible to revolt.

In His discussion, Jesus does not attribute tragedy or accident directly to any person's sin as the Jews did—instead, He affirms the sinfulness of everyone. A person who flagrantly sins can expect judgment to come eventually, though it may be long delayed (Ecclesiastes 8:11-13). Victims of calamity die physically, but anyone who does not repent faces spiritual death.

1. What is so bad about a tree that bears no fruit? Luke 13:1-6; Isaiah 5:1-7.

**Comment:** We need to connect this parable to what precedes it, and with Jesus' calling of the Jews to repentance. Christ gives it to illustrate God's dealings with Israel and their wickedness despite all His kindness. *The "certain man" who owned the vineyard* is God, and the *vineyard* is Israel. The *fig tree* represents the individual Israelite, especially the Jew in this case. The *coming of the owner for fruit* is God's desire for His people to produce good works. Finally, the *barrenness of the tree* portrays the wickedness of the people, who produced nothing of benefit to others (Micah 7:1; Matthew 21:19). The vineyard acts as a beneficial enclosure, symbolizing God's people isolated from other nations and especially honored with the light of supernatural revelation through the prophets and all the influences of divine grace. The Israelites, however, did not recognize this blessed condition.

2. Why does the owner cut the tree down? Luke 13:7.

**Comment:** The *keeper* represents Jesus as Intercessor, pleading to God to spare His people. The "certain man"—the Father—had one purpose when he planted his fig tree in the vineyard: to gather fruit at the appointed time. After all the care, time, and money he had spent on it, he anxiously looked forward to fruit, but he is disappointed. After three years, he is positive the tree is barren, so he orders it cut down, perhaps to plant something in its place.

Similarly, God sought, by example, miracle, teaching, and sacrifice, to produce fruit in Israel—in fact, He expected it. Sometimes there were signs of encouragement, but in the end, Israel totally rejected Him (John 1:11). He came anticipating fruit from Israel and met with firm resistance. Where He looked for faith, He found disbelief. Israel, content with all the benefits of the sunshine and showers of divine benevolence, refused to produce fruit for God. As spiritual Israelites, Christians are now likewise expected to produce fruit (Romans 7:4-6; John 15:1-8; Proverbs 12:12).

3. How would the tree benefit from the keeper working with it longer? Luke 13:8.

**Comment:** The owner's waiting signifies the delay of vengeance, to give Israel an opportunity to repent. Knowing that the vineyard's owner had every reason to be disappointed with the barren tree, the keeper intercedes for the tree's life, asking for another year. He does not plead for its indefinite existence, but for an opportunity to stimulate it into fruitfulness by imposing more dramatic measures. If it bears fruit after further treatment, then the keeper knows that the owner will be pleased to allow the tree to remain in the vineyard. The keeper asks only for the owner to postpone judgment.

In the intercessory plea of the keeper, we have an illustration of Jesus' reluctance to let Israel go. During His life, Jesus prayed for fruitless Israel to repent (Matthew 23:27; Mark 1:15; Luke 23:34). In answer, God sent the apostles to provide Israel another opportunity to repent, as they fertilized Israel with God's truth (Matthew 10:6; Luke 24:46-47; II Timothy 2:25-26).

4. Do the owner and the keeper of the vineyard agree on how to proceed? Luke 13:9; John 15:2, 6.

**Comment:** That the owner wants to destroy the tree but the keeper prays for its continued life for another year is not a case of the owner being full of wrath and the keeper defying him. The owner and the keeper have the same goal: to help the tree to produce fruit, if possible. Similarly, both the Father and the Son are angered by sin. Any thoughts Christ had toward Israel were also the thoughts of the Father (John 5:19; 10:30). Even though He is longsuffering, Jesus agrees with the owner of the vineyard in cutting down the tree if it refuses the offer of help (Hebrews 6:4-6; Proverbs 29:1). The Son never denies the right of the Father to destroy, and both agree in offering grace to the sinner at the best time.

Since the vineyard and the tree planted in it belong to the owner, he has a right to expect it to bear fruit—or to destroy anything barren or useless on his land. Some people falsely believe this delay means judgment will not come against them. However, the owner clearly says to cut the tree down if it ultimately does not produce fruit—a righteous decision since it would be given every opportunity to bear fruit. If a tree does not produce fruit, it wastes valuable resources and occupies needed space where a fruit-producing tree could stand. Within this parable stands a warning for anyone to whom God has revealed His truth: Do not delay producing good fruit (I Peter 4:17-19; II Peter 3:3-10)!