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BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS

The Cursed Tree

Just a Thought · Mark 11:13

By John L. Wheeler

“And seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to see if he could find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs.” (Mark 11:13 ESV)

There was a fig tree growing beside the road between Bethany and Jerusalem. How long it had stood there, no one knows. Perhaps travelers had rested beneath its branches. Perhaps others had stopped to gather its fruit in season. Year after year, its roots reached deeper into the soil, its branches spread, and its leaves appeared with the coming of spring. To anyone passing by, it was simply another tree growing in the Judean countryside.

But this tree had an appointment with its Creator.

Consider another appointment, recorded in the fifth chapter of John. At the Pool of Bethesda lay a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. For nearly four decades he had lived with an affliction from which he could not deliver himself. Then, one particular day, Jesus approached him, knowing how long he had suffered, and commanded him to rise, take up his bed, and walk. The man had no idea that the day would be unlike any other in his life.

The fig tree had been growing for an unknown number of years. The man had suffered for thirty-eight. Neither knew what awaited them when Christ approached. One would demonstrate His sovereign power to restore; the other, His sovereign authority to judge. Both encounters belonged to the providence of the God who governs every circumstance of His creation.

Now consider what happened that morning outside Jerusalem.

Jesus was hungry. Seeing a fig tree covered with leaves, He approached it looking for something to eat. But there was nothing. Not a single fig. Mark adds a curious explanation: it was not the season for figs.

Why would Jesus expect fruit when the season for figs had not arrived?

Certain fig trees produce small, immature fruit before or alongside their leaves. Although the regular harvest was still in the future, a tree displaying abundant foliage might reasonably be expected to possess these early indications of fruitfulness. Yet Mark tells us that Jesus found nothing but leaves.

What a remarkable picture. The tree appeared healthy and promising. Its leaves were beautiful, its branches flourishing. From a distance, everything suggested life and fruitfulness.

But there was nothing to eat.

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The Cursed Tree

Jesus spoke to the tree: *"May no one ever eat fruit from you again."* (Mark 11:14 ESV)

And the disciples heard Him.

What must they have thought? They had watched their Master heal the sick, give sight to the blind, and even raise the dead. They had seen His authority exercised to restore what sin and suffering had damaged. But now He had pronounced judgment upon a tree.

Why?

Mark does something fascinating with the account. He tells us about the curse, then takes us into Jerusalem, where Jesus enters the temple and drives out those who were buying and selling. Only afterward does Mark return to the fig tree.

The arrangement is hardly insignificant.

Consider the temple. It was magnificent, the center of Israel's religious life. Priests performed their duties, sacrifices were offered, prayers were recited, and worshipers gathered according to the requirements of the law. The religious establishment possessed an impressive outward appearance.

There were leaves everywhere.

But where was the fruit?

The Messiah had come to His covenant people. The One promised through the prophets stood in their midst. Yet those entrusted with the Scriptures largely failed to recognize Him. Luke tells us that Jesus wept over Jerusalem because it did not recognize the time of its visitation. The city possessed the temple, the priesthood, the sacrifices, and the promises, but its religious leaders were rejecting the very One to whom those things pointed.

The fig tree and the temple were telling the same story.

This was not a new warning. Centuries earlier, the Lord had declared through Jeremiah: *"There are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them."* (Jeremiah 8:13 ESV)

The following morning, as Jesus and His disciples passed along the road, Peter noticed something extraordinary.

The tree was dead.

Not merely wilted or shedding its leaves. Mark tells us that it had withered to its roots. The tree that had appeared so promising the previous morning was now completely withered.

The words of Christ had accomplished exactly what He intended.

There was no injustice in His judgment. A tree possesses no moral responsibility. Its Creator had sovereign authority over it, and He had appointed it to become a visible declaration of a far greater judgment. The same holy Christ who had wept over Jerusalem would pronounce judgment upon the city that rejected Him. Within a generation, its magnificent temple would lie in ruins.

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But surely the lesson does not end with Jerusalem.

There is something uncomfortable about that tree when we consider our own lives. How easily we can become satisfied with the appearance of Christianity! We attend worship, read Scripture, discuss theology, defend sound doctrine, and participate in the activities of the church. All these things are good and proper. But none, by itself, establishes that we possess spiritual life.

Jesus warned of those who would stand before Him claiming to have prophesied, cast out demons, and performed mighty works in His name. Yet He would declare, *"I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."* (Matthew 7:23 ESV)

Imagine that. Men claiming extraordinary accomplishments in the name of Christ, yet unknown to Christ Himself.

Jude described false teachers within the religious community as *"fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted."* (Jude 12 ESV) They possessed outward association with the people of God, but no genuine spiritual life.

And there lies the danger.

A person may know a great deal about Christ without knowing Christ. He may understand the doctrines of grace without having experienced the regenerating grace of God. He may possess an abundance of religious leaves while lacking the fruit that proceeds from saving faith.

This does not mean that fruit earns salvation. Nothing could be further from the gospel. Salvation is entirely of grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. But the grace that saves also gives life, and the life given by the Holy Spirit produces fruit. Christ is the true vine, and those united to Him bear fruit because His life is at work within them.

The tree outside Jerusalem had stood for years under the providential government of God. On one particular morning, its Creator approached it. Its leaves were beautiful, its appearance promising, but there was no fruit.

And that brings the account remarkably close to home.

When Christ looks upon our lives, He sees far more than others see. He knows our religious activities, our professions of faith, our theological convictions, and our outward conduct. But He also knows the heart.

The question is not whether our branches are covered with beautiful leaves.

The question is whether we belong to the One who alone can give us life.

Just a thought.

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