

The parable of the Barren Fig Tree

Introduction

Context:

The need for repentance for all – see earlier verse 5: *except ye repent, you shall all likewise perish.*

Passage for study:

6 He spoke also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and looked for fruit on it , and found none.

7 Then said he unto the keeper who tended his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why should it continue to deplete the soil?

8 And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and put fertilizer on it:

9 And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that you shall cut it down. [KJV &NET]

This is the only Gospel to record this parable of Jesus.

The context is important, as it reveals the reason for the giving of the parable. Those who had come to listen to Jesus, assuming that Jesus as their Messiah would be interested to know of the recent tragedy which had befallen some of the people from their own local area, and how Pilate how slaughtered some of them.



There is an incident recorded in by the historian Josephus who lived around the same time, wrote in his book:

The Jewish War 2.175-177

On a later occasion he provoked a fresh uproar by expending upon the construction of an aqueduct the sacred treasure known as Corbonas; the water was brought from a distance of [seventy kilometres]. Indignant at this proceeding, the populace formed a ring round the tribunal of Pilate, then on a visit to Jerusalem, and besieged him with angry clamour.

He, foreseeing the tumult, had interspersed among the crowd a troop of his soldiers, armed but disguised in civilian dress, with orders not to use their swords, but to beat any rioters with cudgels. He now from his tribunal gave the agreed signal.

Large numbers of the Jews perished, some from the blows which they received, others trodden to death by their companions in the ensuing flight. Cowed by the fate of the victims, the multitude was reduced to silence.

As this massacre was in the vicinity of the temple, it may be this incident that the Jews talking to Jesus were referring to, as the slaughter was a result of the protest of the stealing by the Romans from the temple sacrifices of the people (known as Corban)

Many assumed that Jesus as the Messiah would bring about the restoration of the nation of Israel, and so would react at such an injustice. (Acts 1:6) The reaction of Jesus implied that they also believed that those who died must have been very bad to have perished in such a way. His reaction was not what they expected.

But then, the view point of Jesus is often at odds with most people, as they only see things from their own tiny point of view.

Jesus replied Do you really think that they were worse sinners than anyone else? No. Except you repent you will all likewise perish! This would have shocked his listeners who thought themselves so pious.

Then to prove that he was in fact aware of the news even more than they were, he used another recent example: what about the eighteen people who died in Jerusalem when the Tower of Siloam collapsed and on them – were they sinners above other men?

Jesus answered his own question – No. Except you repent you will all likewise perish!

This would have been a silence, as the implications of his words had an effect on their minds. No one was any better or worse when it comes to sin. Sin is exceeding sinful (Romans 7:13) There are no grades or levels in sin. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) They were all guilty before God (Romans 3:19) yet they were busy pointing the finger at others, and thinking they were better, and deserved protection and preservation. They were holy and untouchable – see Isaiah 65:5 so they thought.

But Jesus kindly put them out of their false illusions, and explained the brutal reality of their situation: Except you repent you will all likewise perish!

He described then, this fig tree which had been regularly visited by the owner of the vineyard looking for fruit on this fig tree – for three years – but couldn't find any figs. So the owner could not see the point of the fig tree taking nutrients from the soil and taking precious space which could be put to better use. Chop it down was the order to the keeper of the vineyard. But the farmer suggested leaving it alone just a little longer – for him to dig around the soil to disturb the roots, and add fertiliser, maybe that shakeup and extra goodness would trigger the tree to produce some decent fruit.

This simple story was straightforward enough, and an common experience to those listeners. Perhaps the more discerning would realise Jesus was of course talking about them.

Vineyards often contained other fruit trees, for pollination purposes, and to make use of corners where vines were unable to be supported. Space was a premium. There was nothing wrong with the soil if the vineyard itself was doing well.

The opportunity to produce fruit was equal across the vineyard, it seems the fig tree though which was specially planted was a disappointment.

The Lord Jesus knew that many of his listeners knew the Psalms and prophets. His story about this fig tree was similar to parables in the Old Testament:

Psalms 80:8-13: You have brought a vine out of Egypt: you have cast out the nations, and planted it. You prepared room before it, and did cause it to take deep root, and it filled the land. The hills were covered with the shadow of it, and the boughs thereof were like the goodly cedars. She sent out her boughs unto the sea, and her branches unto the river. Why have you then broken down her hedges, so that all they which pass by the way do pluck her? The boar out of the wood does waste it, and the wild beast of the field devours it.

Isaiah 5:1-4: Now will I sing to my well-beloved a song of my beloved touching his vineyard. My well-beloved hath a vineyard in a very fruitful hill: And he fenced it, and gathered out the stones thereof, and planted it with the choicest vine, and built a tower in the midst of it, and also made a winepress therein: and he looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem, and men of Judah, judge, I pray you, betwixt me and my vineyard. What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?

Both examples were parables of dashed expectations, of great disappointment of a lack of fruitfulness compared to the amount of work which had gone into it. Both clearly refer to the nation of Israel.

So, in the parable Jesus presented. The fig tree was also the nation of Israel. Jesus himself was the keeper of the vineyard. God was the owner of the vineyard. For three years Israel had received the ministry of the very best husbandman. Jesus the greatest teacher, who knew exactly how to produce the optimum fruit, and maximum pleasure for the will and purpose of the Father, had walked and talked the length and breadth of that vineyard. The response was not from the Jewish tree. Fruit instead came from the Gentile vine, and by vigorous pruning, fruit was apparent. Instead the fig tree towering over the vineyard, was just proving to be a waste of resource, a distraction, a negative affect.

The inevitable time of judgement on the future of the tree came. But not before the keeper put much effort and energy into his own people. Jesus himself by his teachings disrupted their tired roots, and made them think differently, to look at themselves in a different light, he brought in air and light into the soil breaking up the clods and fallow ground (Hosea 10:11,12). It was Jesus who provided the injection of spirituality and nutrients for the mind, in his death, resurrection and ascension. After that injection of goodness into the foundation of the roots of the tree, some repented, and converted. But soon it was apparent that the fig tree was too far gone, too bent and twisted. So like those who perished when the tower of Siloam fell, and those who died on the orders of Pilate, so also the Jewish nation was cut down by the Romans. It was cumbering the ground. Space was available for the silverlings of the Gentile vine coaxed to produce fruit by the Apostles. It was not the end of the fig tree. As Paul the Apostle speaks of the olive tree in Romans 11. So also the fig tree's roots have not perished, but God promised that new growth and resurrection is possible even for a nation. So Jesus speaking of a

great while ahead, in Luke 21:29 of the vigorous growth of the fig tree in the latter days.

The best quality figs in any year are those of the first crop following the winter when the tree puts forth its new leaves. The time is upon us when the winter of the times of Gentiles will be over and gone. When the repentance of the nation of Israel will be sincere and they will become fruitful. (Zechariah 12:10) As we are reminded in the Song 2: 11-13; *For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land; the fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.*

The ratio of the number of seeds to the volume of flesh in a single fig fruit gives it the potential for the highest level of reproduction above all other fruit bearing trees. The nation of Israel was expected to be more fruitful, but failed. They failed to repent. As the Gentiles thinking about this parable, they also must think of Jesus message – except you repent you will also likewise perish.

The fruit expected from those who have benefitted from the teaching, and the very life of the keeper of the vineyard, is the fruit of righteousness. Upon inspection, what kind of fruit will the owner of the vineyard find we have produced? - see Jeremiah 24:2 for the reminder.

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