

Prophetic Parables

The Fig Tree

The Barren Fig Tree – Jerusalem destroyed 70 AD
Luke 13:6-9

The Branches and the Leaves – Faithful Remnant & the Second Advent
Matthew 24:32-34
Mark 13:28-30
Luke 21:29-35

The Fig Tree – Symbol of Israel’s present position

Chapter 10 of Romans and many other passages of Scripture, teach us that Israel is presently set aside by God, and that there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord is over all. The Church has been brought in through the Gospel of Christ which offers salvation to all men – Jew and Gentile. “For unto all that call upon him. For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 10:12-13).

The **fig tree** is often used in Scripture to symbolize the nation in its judicially separated position before God. We have this taught in the first of these prophetic parables concerning the fig tree.

Parable of the fig tree – Destruction of Jerusalem 70 A D

Luke 13:6-9:

“He spake also this parable; A certain man had a **fig tree** planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come

seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.”

The fig tree should have had fruit, but it was barren three years and took up valuable ground, though doubtless tenderly cultivated and fed (and so dispenses with the idea that it was *made* to be barren). Yet, the dresser interceded. In response, the owner of the vineyard extended a time of grace to allow the tree to bear fruit. If it did not fruit then it was to be cut down. The parable is deliberately silent as to the outcome allowing biblical prophecy and history to furnish the conclusion.

The interpretation is plain. The fig tree in this instance symbolizes Israel planted in God’s vineyard. Unlike some other parables the vineyard here is subsidiary or incidental to the essential symbol and lesson of the fig tree. (It is the *context* and not merely the same words in various texts that allow correct interpretation). The Lord looked for the fruits of repentance and recognition from the nation of Israel for three years (very possibly referring to the time of His public ministry) but there was none! As the Dresser of the vineyard He interceded on the nation’s behalf - even when nailed to the cross– “Father forgive them for they know nor what they do.” Yet, we know even during that gracious intercession, the national heart was resolute in its stubborn opposition to its Messiah and resisted the call to repentance. It was eventually “cut down.” Jerusalem was desolate and the Temple destroyed in 70 AD, which was an emphatic demonstration of the setting aside of the nation and the postponement of its covenant blessings that took place judicially at Calvary. The testimony of the nation to the world had been cut down and was no more. The nation will of course be revived in a coming day – but this is not the subject of this parable.

The nation of Israel set aside in judgment

Before we look at the next parable of the fig tree, it is important to mention another occasion in the NT where the fig tree is *representative* of Israel, though not in the form of a parable. It is recorded by Mark and Matthew and refers to the Lord's symbolic judgment pronounced upon the nation.

Mark 11:13-14; 19-20: "And seeing a **fig tree** afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find any thing thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever. And his disciples heard it"... "And when even was come, he went out of the city. And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away."

Matthew 21:19-20: "And when he saw a **fig tree** in the way, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only, and said unto it, Let no fruit grow [i.e., from within] on thee henceforward forever.....the fig tree withered away."

In line with prophecy the scene is Jerusalem and its vicinity. It is the beginning of the last week of the Lord's ministry. This was a judgment delivered before His Olivet Discourse, at the time of His triumphant entry into Jerusalem and the second Temple cleansing. It was also before the delivery of the three Temple parables of Matthew 21-22.

In this passage the fig tree represents a spiritually barren Israel. The early fruit of the fig tree appears before its leaves, but not so here. The leaves should be a sign of fruit. But Israel had no fruit, only the external foliage of religious formality. So the Lord cursed the tree, an act which anticipated the postponement of the nation's covenant blessings. This postponement was consummated when He was "cut off" - His death at Calvary. The account in Mark states "the time of figs was not yet." The comment by A Clarke is useful. "As it was not as yet the time for gathering in the fruits, and yet about the time when they were ready to be gathered, our Lord with propriety expected to find some. But as this happened about five days before that passover on which Christ suffered, and the passover that year fell on the beginning of April, it has been asked, "How could our Lord expect to find ripe figs in the end of March?" Answer, Because figs were ripe in Judea as early as the passover. Besides, the fig tree puts forth its fruit first, and afterwards its leaves. This appears to refer to the time of gathering the figs, that is, there should have been fruit."

Parable of the fig tree – National judgment but a faithful remnant emerges

Mark 13:28-30
"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When her branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is near: So ye in like manner, when ye shall see these things come to pass, know that it is nigh, even at the doors. Verily I

say unto you, that this generation shall not pass, till all these things be done."

Matthew 24:32-34

"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; When his branch is yet tender, and putteth forth leaves, ye know that summer is nigh Verily I say

unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled."

Luke 21:29-32

"And he spake to them a parable; Behold the fig tree, and all the trees; When they now shoot forth, ye see and know of your own selves that summer is now

nigh at hand. So likewise ye, when ye see these things come to pass, know ye that

the kingdom of God is nigh at hand. Verily I say unto you, This generation shall

not pass away, till all be fulfilled.”

This parable was delivered during the Lord’s Olivet Discourse. His words just prior to that time delivered a dire indictment of Israel’s national unbelief and, at the same time, spoke of a future remnant awaiting His Second Advent. “Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets, and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify; and some of them shall ye scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city: That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel unto the blood of Zacharias son of Barachias, whom ye slew between the temple and the altar. Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord” (Matt 23:34-39).

In each of these parabolic accounts the fig tree symbolizes Israel - a nation now under judgment, but with a view to a distant day when the putting forth of leaves is symbolic of the *emerging* fruitful and faithful remnant of Israel, Christ’s Second Advent and Millennial Kingdom, all of which is foreshadowed in that gracious encounter the Lord had with Nathaniel. There he was, sitting under the fig tree, a symbol of the nation’s rejection. And yet, the Lord said of him – an “Israelite in whom there is no guile,” one who properly confessed Christ as the Son of God and King of Israel. To him was given a millennial vision – not of the Son of God or the King of Israel – for he already knew Him as that, but of the Son of Man – the millennial title of Christ. “And he saith unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man” (Jn 1:51)

In Luke we observe the additional revelation in keeping with the Gentile nature of his Gospel. The nations are brought into view, symbolized by the expression “and all the trees” (v 29). It speaks of the time when the Gentile nations will rise against Israel just before the coming of the Son of man with power and glory.¹

¹ Others regard the fig tree in this case simply as underlining the Lord’s teaching concerning the *imminence* and *certainty* of His coming. Just as the leaves on a fig tree were a sure *sign* that summer was near, so too the *signs* listed in verses 21-29 are a sure indication that His Second Advent will be nigh.