Miracle 37: Jesus Withers the Fig Tree on the Road near Bethany

Matt. 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14; 20-24

The Texts:

Matt. 21:18-22—18 Now in the morning as he returned into the city, he hungered. 19 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 on thee henceforward for ever. And presently the fig tree withered away. 20 And when the disciples saw it, they marveled, saying, How soon is the fig tree withered away! 21 Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done. 22 And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

Mark 11:12-14; 20-24—12 And on the morrow, when they were come from Bethany, he was hungry: 13 And seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came, if haply he might find anything thereon: and when he came to it, he found nothing but leaves; for the time of figs was not yet. 14 And Jesus answered and said unto it, No man eat fruit of thee hereafter forever. And his disciples heard it. 20 And in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. 21 And Peter calling to remembrance saith unto him, Master, behold, the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away. 22 And Jesus answering saith unto them, Have faith in God. 23 For verily I say unto you, That whosoever shall say unto this mountain, Be thou removed, and thou cast into the sea; and shall not doubt in his heart, but shall believe that those things which he saith shall come to pass; he shall have whatsoever he saith. 24 Therefore I say unto you, What things soever ye desire, when ye pray, believe that ye receive them, and ye shall have them.

The Contexts (21:18; 11:12): Five observations:

1) After Jesus restored physical sight to two blind men near Jericho (miracle 36), Jesus, the disciples, and the large crowd proceed up to Jerusalem for the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem (Matt. 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19). He then goes into the Jerusalem Temple and after looking around at everything, He left for Bethany with the twelve, since it was already late (Mark 11:11).

2) And in the morning, as He (and the disciples) were returning from Bethany into the city (Jerusalem), He (Jesus) was hungry (21:18; 11:12).

3) Note: The fact that Jesus was hungry indicates the humanity of the God-man (Christ-Jesus). He must have skipped breakfast at Mary, Martha, and Lazarus’ house.

The Miracle (21:19; 11:12-14): Ten observations:

1) And Jesus seeing a fig tree afar off (from afar) along the way (road) having leaves, He came if perhaps He will find anything on it; and when He came to it, He found nothing but leaves upon it; for it was not yet the time (season) of figs (21:19a; 11:13).

2) Note: This fig tree was along the road and not part of someone’s personal fig tree orchard. Jesus was not a thief.

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3) Note: Mark notes that it was not yet the season for figs, but there should have been small, green, edible buds called paggim (Song of Solomon 2:13) on the fig tree. Though not all that tasty (according to those describing them in commentaries), they are edible and could relieve His hunger. From a distance, Jesus could not have seen that the tree was barren of fruit (apart from His omniscience); but having come to the tree it had no green fig buds. Thus, though full of leaves, it would not bear fruit that season. (Christie)

4) Lesson: This was a hypocritical fig tree. The leaves (outward appearance) were all show with no substance. It was false and untruthful (a sham). This fig tree was illustrative of the Jewish religious leaders; they were all about outward appearance of keeping the letter of the law, but inwardly they were hypocrites and bore no fruit of righteousness (Matt. 23:27-28).

5) Next, “Jesus answered and said unto it” (21:19b; 11:14a). What, Jesus talking to a fig tree? Why does Mark say “He answered”? Jesus knowing everything (omniscient) answered the situation that He had just encountered (a fruitless fig tree). The condition of the tree spoke volumes to Jesus, and He answered that message with a message of His own.

6) He said: “No one no more will eat fruit of you forever (literally-- Never out of you fruit will be)” (21:19c; 11:14b). This is what commentators call the “curse” of the fig tree; they get this from Peter’s statement in Mark 11:21 (“the fig tree which thou cursedst”).

7) Note: This is the only miracle in the New Testament that involves destruction. Jesus pronounced that fig tree’s doom (killed that tree) with His words.

8) “And presently (immediately) the fig tree withered away” (21:19d). The Scriptures tell us that the miracle happened immediately, but the disciples did not see it right away. Mark says, “And His disciples heard it” (11:14). How do you hear a tree die? You don’t. They “heard” what Jesus said (but didn’t see the results yet) and, then, He and His disciples proceed into Jerusalem.

9) Upon arriving in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples go into the Temple and Jesus cleanses the Temple (Matt. 21:12-16; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19:45-48). Remember that Jesus had gone into the Temple the night before, looked around, and left (Mark 11:11). Evidently, He saw some things the night before that He needed to rectify.

10) Note: It is intriguing that just after His first miracle (changing water into wine- John 2:1-11), Jesus cleansed out corruption in the Temple complex (John 2:13-16). Now, about three years later near the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus is again cleansing the Temple. Like the cursing of the fig tree, the Temple cleansing was signifying God’s disapproval of the Temple culture of shameful, hypocritical worship by the Jewish religious leaders. They had made it a place of business rather than a place of worship of God.

The Morning after the Miracle (21:20; 11:20-21): Six observations:

1) Having cleansed the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples return at “evening” (Greek #3796 -late) to Bethany (Mark 11:19). “And in the morning as they were passing by the fig tree site, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots” (11:20).

2) Wuest (a Greek scholar) points out that the order of the Greek words gives the emphasis as suggesting that it was in the clear morning light that they noticed the tree. It was (since the miracle was immediate) in the same condition the previous evening, but it would have dark when they passed the spot of the fig tree coming back to Bethany.

3) Note: All saw (Greek #1492 meaning seeing that becomes knowing; perceived) the after effects of Jesus’ words the morning before. The fig tree was “dried up from the roots” (11:20). The Greek word “dried up” (Greek #3583 means dried up; withered away) and is in the perfect tense meaning
completely withered away (dead from the roots up). When the roots are dead, the tree is dead and no amount of watering will revive it. It wasn’t just dying; it was dead.

4) Meanwhile, Matthew’s account continues with these words, “And when the disciples saw (perceived) it (the fig tree), they marveled (were awestruck; amazed), saying: How soon (instantly; quickly) is the fig tree withered away” (21:20). The disciples’ reaction was utter amazement that the fig tree could wither away (die) so quickly. Then, Peter speaks up (as he often did).

5) “And Peter called to remembrance (Greek #363 meaning carefully thinking back and reconstructing something in your mind)” the event of the previous morning. And he said to Jesus: “Master, behold, the fig tree that you cursed is withered away” (11:21).

6) Note: Peter calls Him Master (Rabbi; Teacher) and said “behold” (Look; See) the fig tree that you “cursed” (to curse; to give over to ruin) is withered away (permanently- perfect tense). Peter connected Jesus’ words with complete destruction (judgment) of the fig tree.

Jesus’ Answer and Declarations (21:21-22; 11:22-24): Fourteen observations:

1) “And Jesus answering, says unto them (not just Peter; but all the disciples): Have faith in God (11:22). What a statement! It is a command (imperative) to continuously have faith in God. He is calling for continual (lifestyle; habitual) trust (belief) in God. “It’s a Divine command; not a suggestion.” (Havner)

2) Note: The object of our faith must always be God! “Faith is only as good as the object in which it trusts; in this case, in the ever trustworthy, always Faithful God.” (Source unknown).

3) Then, both Matthew and Mark record some authoritative and powerful words of Jesus: “Verily (truly), I say unto you” (21:21; 11:23). This is the Greek word #281 “amen” indicating that what follows is both authoritative and important. It is a command (imperative). This command calls for His disciples to change their focus from the dead fig tree to the living God; a command to have faith in the power of God which they had seen displayed in this miracle.

4) Jesus goes on to say: “If you have faith and do not doubt, you will do not only (the miracle of) the fig tree; but (term of contrast) also, if you say to this mountain, be removed and be cast into the sea; it will be done” (21:21). The essence of these same words is recorded by Mark with adding that “doubt” is “in the heart” and expanding Jesus’ statement to “whatsoever he says” (11:23).

5) Note: Removing a mountain is a much bigger task than killing a fig tree; but Jesus is using hyperbole to teach the disciples an important lesson. The “mountain metaphor” represents what appears to be the impossible (something far beyond our human, finite ability).

6) This is where faith begins; believing faith taps into the power of God to accomplish His purpose. We have a God Who delights in the impossible. (Hiebert)

7) Both of these commands (have faith and do not doubt) are in the passive voice meaning that it is an outside agent/source that gives the ability to be able to have faith and/or not doubt. The “means or power” for those actions are beyond our human resources. These things are only possible through the Holy Spirit (God).

8) Application: Matters of both faith and doubt must rely on God to become effective or operative (Eph. 2:8-9; James 1:5-8). Are we walking by faith or wobbling in doubt? We don’t deserve to receive anything from God (as James wrote).

9) Having commanded the disciples to have mountain moving faith and not to waiver/doubt in that faith, Jesus goes on to say: “Therefore, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you receive; and it will be to you (you will have it)” (11:24; 21:22).

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10) **Note:** Be careful here: Is Jesus promising to give anything for which we ask in faith? **No!!** Jesus is not giving a “Name it; Claim it” formula for getting everything we want from God. An affirmative answer to our prayers is **assured only** if the request is both in the will of God and for the glory of God.

11) First, God can’t literally give us anything/everything. For example, He could not/would not answer a request to approve of our sin (just because we might want to continue in it). Nor could/would He grant a request for a person to become a “fellow god.”

12) Second, it is not unconditional. For example, we must abide in Him and let His Word abide in us (John 15:7) and we can’t ask amiss (out of our own selfishness- James 4:3).

13) Third, we need to trust God enough to have Him say no and turn down the request if that is what He chooses to do. For example, Paul asked God three times to be relieved of his thorn in the flesh, and God refused (2 Cor.12:8-9). Additionally, God does not automatically heal everyone for whom we pray in faith. (Garland)

14) **Note:** God forbid that we should try to bring “His All Things” down to a level of what we think is possible or we humanly desire (Psalm 37:4). Sometimes the desires of our hearts are not what God knows is best for us.

**Implications and Applications:** Seven observations:

1) This miracle is about the exposure of hypocrisy; not about the destruction or extinguishing of the life of a fig tree.

2) Jesus saw an opportunity to teach His disciples an important truth using this fig tree as an object lesson. He turned this miracle into an “action sermon” illustrating His message concerning the large group of outwardly impressive, unbelieving Jewish religious leaders within the nation of Israel. Hypocrites; bearing no spiritual fruit of righteousness (Rom. 10:1-3).

3) Fig trees can get 20 feet high and 20 feet wide and be quite impressive; but a fruitless fig tree is worthless for nourishment. God is not impressed with self-aggrandizing “servants.”

4) The fig tree miracle brackets (or serves as bookends) to the cleansing of the temple story. Perhaps God wants us to see that Jesus did not just cleanse the temple, He cursed it even as He did the fig tree. It was just a few years later (70AD) that the temple (and Jerusalem) was totally destroyed as Jesus predicted (Luke 21:6; Matt. 24:2).

5) **Note:** Matthew telescoped the two events (cleansing of the temple and cursing of the fig tree) into two separate, successive accounts without the precise time intervals that Mark noted. Matthew was not emphasizing the chronology of the cleansing of the temple and the cursing of the fig tree, but was emphasizing the message that Jesus was communicating to the Jewish nation of impending death and destruction resulting from hypocritical worship and lack of being what we profess to be (which ought to be our emphasis as well).

6) Application: It is by and through fruit-bearing that our Christian lives are evaluated. Baptism, church membership, participation in the Lord’s Table (communion), and other outward practices of our Christian lives are not sufficient in living a life pleasing to God (though they are all important steps in a believer’s life). Leaves make a loud profession; fruit-bearing demonstrates that there is true possession of a relationship with Jesus Christ.

7) One last note: Adam and Eve made themselves garments of fig leaves to attempt to hide the nakedness of their bodies from the eye of the all-seeing God. But leaves alone do not hide the sinfulness of our souls that need a Savior nor the fruitlessness in the lives of many believers. (Ryle)