

## JESUS-WHO TOLD GREAT STORIES

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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 dig about it, and dung it. And if it bear fruit, well; and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down (Luke 13:6-9).

A house without windows resembles a vault, and a sermon without illustrations seldom commands attention. Even the most boring oration generates interest when the speaker tells a story. Many listeners are too young to understand theology, but none too old to be attracted by an anecdote. A raconteur can enthrall multitudes of listeners. Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest storyteller of all ages. Throughout His ministry He used parables to express everlasting truth. His message about a fig tree in a vineyard provided one of His greatest word pictures. Within four verses He encompassed eternity.

### The Special Desire... Glorious

It stuck out like a sore thumb. No man in his senses would expect to see a fig tree among grapes. The people produced fruit of many kinds but one fact was unchangeable-grapes were grapes, and figs were figs, and if a farmer desired to cultivate both, he did so in different areas. It was refreshing to see vineyards reaching to distant horizons and rewarding to taste the grapes, but to plant a fig tree amid such surroundings was an act of irresponsibility. The Lord had probably seen this situation and described it in His preaching.

Evidently this man liked figs, for otherwise he would not have planted the tree among vines. Maybe he considered the fruit essential for the health of his family. Perhaps the matter was discussed at mealtimes, and since the consensus desired to cultivate figs, he did what was requested. Other men who

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owned adjacent land probably stared and questioned the wisdom of their neighbor. He smiled at their surprise, but he knew what he was doing. His grapes were destined to be sold in the market, but the figs were for private consumption. Jesus said, "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard." Thus did the Lord capture the attention of His audience. They wondered what He would make of the situation, for throughout their long history the fig tree had been associated with the Hebrew nation. It was first seen in the garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve took its leaves to make the first garments worn by humans. Later this fruit was made into cakes and brought to David (see 1 Chron. 12:40). The Bible describes how Abigail supplied the king with two hundred cakes of figs during his stay in Hebron (see 1 Sam. 25:18). Hezekiah was cured of a life-threatening disease when a lump of figs was placed as a poultice on a boil (see Isa. 38:21).

An important text is found in Joel 1:7 where God identified Himself with the chosen people. Speaking of a heathen invader, the Lord said: "He hath ... barked my fig tree." An ailing fig

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tree reminded the nation of God's judgments. It suggested the punishment which fell upon people who displeased Jehovah. When Jesus spoke of one special tree in a vineyard, His audience knew He was speaking indirectly about Israel, the fig tree, which had been placed among the other nations in the world. The Hebrews, who were the apple of God's eye, had been favored throughout their long history. W. E. Shewell Cooper says: "In the East, the fig tree produces two special crops every season. The normal winter fruit ripens in May and June, and the summer figs in late August and September. Sometimes one crop overlaps the other . . . It is possible to pick fruit over nine or ten months of the year."<sup>1</sup>

#### The Serious Disappointment... Grief

Fig trees produce a full crop of fruit within three years of planting, and this explains why the farmer said: "These three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none" (Luke 13:7). His patience had been exhausted; his time was being wasted. Some teachers consider this to be a veiled

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reference to the fact that Jesus ministered for three years and presented His generation with an opportunity to cooperate with the Almighty. Unfortunately, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not" (John 1:11).

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that many Christians resemble the children of Israel. They had no special claim upon the Lord, but for some inscrutable reason He loved them, and gave Himself for them. The poet was correct when he wrote:

Count your blessings,  
Name them one by one,  
And it will surprise you  
What the Lord hath done.

During times of crisis and temptation, many failed to honor their commitments. Vows were forgotten, promises left unfulfilled, and vital tasks neglected. The Savior predicted that in the past days the love of many would wax cold (see Matt. 24:12). He was concerned because the church at Ephesus left their first love (see Rev. 2:4). The farmer-and God-had special desires concerning their fig trees and planned to enjoy the fruit. It must be a cause for sadness when God is grieved with His people. There is a vast difference between the Jewish nation and the Christian church, but some things are changeless. The Lord cannot be thrilled with anybody who remains a disappointment. It would be to the everlasting credit of every Christian if he considered whether or not he is an unfruitful tree.

#### The Sad Decision... Gloom

Cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? (Luke 13:7).

The owner of the vineyard could not have been criticized for his decision; he had done everything possible to promote growth. All fig trees were able to produce crops within three years of planting. The man said, "These three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none." His patience had

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been admirable; he waited until the tree had sufficient time to be productive. An impatient person might have destroyed the tree earlier. The time of reckoning had now arrived; action could no longer be delayed.

This parable was an indictment against Israel, upon whom God had lavished infinite care. They had failed to respond, and the Lord was running out of patience. It is always a sad moment when the Almighty abandons any person or project. The Jewish nation should have known this fact, for they had suffered both in Egypt and Babylon. David wrote: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Unfortunately, sometimes even children must be chastised. Solomon said: "He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes" (Prov. 13:24). God's children had become rebellious and defiant. If He had remained indifferent, He would have violated His own law. The Savior was justified when He expelled the money changers from the temple and removed the things that had turned the sanctuary into a market. The owner of the vineyard never contemplated judgment until he had given the tree every opportunity to be productive. The Lord also continues to plead with unresponsive people. Jeremiah said: "It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22-23).

### The Splendid Determination... Grace

The dresser of the vineyard represents the Savior to whom God entrusted the care of His property. His request expressed reluctance to destroy the useless tree. A great amount of energy had already been used in its cultivation, and to cease now would be a tragedy. Judgment should be temporarily postponed while the skill of the cultivator be used again. This is one of the greatest pictures of God's grace. It indicates that when Christ abandons a soul, salvation becomes impossible. God said, "My spirit shall not always strive with man," but it is also correct to claim the Holy Spirit never ceases His work if there is any chance of success.

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When Simon Peter was about to make his greatest mistake, the Savior said, "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not; and when thou art converted [turned back again], strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:31-32). What would have happened to Peter had the Lord not prayed for him? Would he have suffered the fate of the fig tree? Would he have been removed from a place of usefulness? The compelling truth of this parable is the reluctance of the supervisor to permit the destruction of the tree. There is nothing attractive about a dead or dying tree. It is only useful as firewood. Could this be claimed for people upon whom God has lavished His care? It is hard to appreciate the feelings of the husbandman who waited for years in the hope of obtaining fruit. Perhaps it is impossible to know how much the Lord is grieved when He looks at us.

### The Sudden Doom... Guilt

And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down (Luke 13:9).

There comes a last chance for every person with whom

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God has dealings, but it should be remembered that final opportunity comes in this world and not in the next. It is significant that Christ issued a threefold warning to His listeners.

Then said Jesus again unto them, I go my way, and ye shall seek me, and shall die in your sins: whither I go ye cannot come... I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins (John 8:21-24).

The Lord united two important facts: (1) The possibility of dying unforgiven and (2) the impossibility for such people to reach heaven. It must therefore be understood that since Jesus was returning to His Father in heaven, there had to be another destination for unrepentant souls. It is an undeniable fact that the Scriptures speak of heaven and hell. All preachers speak about the former, but unfortunately we are living in an age when the second is seldom mentioned. The Savior said:

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Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it (Matt. 7:13-14).

It must never be forgotten that the Lord came to earth to save sinners; therefore, men needed to be saved. If all are destined to reach heaven safely, Christ only needed to exercise patience, and ultimately He would be able to welcome everybody to a place of eternal bliss. He was very emphatic when He said: "I tell you, Nay; but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). People who believe the teachings of Scripture know God's books will be opened, and sinners condemned (see Rev. 20:11-15).

The Savior described a man's removal from a royal banquet because he was not wearing a wedding garment. The fellow only had himself to blame, for the king had provided garments for every guest. The foolish man who refused the royal gift must have been splendidly attired and believed he did not need charity. The Lord said:

And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment. And he said unto him, Friend, How camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless. Then said the king unto his servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness (Matt. 22:11-13).

Jesus was not only a raconteur. He was God's spokesman upon earth and meant exactly what He said. When fig trees and people reject God's entreaties, their future can only be in jeopardy. "Now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

1. The Zondervan Encyclopedic Bible, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976).

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