

'And as They Passed by in the Morning, They Saw the Fig Tree Withered Away From the roots.'- Mar 11:12-14

by G. Campbell Morgan

G. Campbell Morgan's sermon explores the significance of the withered fig tree as a symbol of judgment on Israel and a call to faith and fruitfulness for both individuals and nations.

Scripture: Mark 11:12

Topics: "Faith", "Spiritual Fruitfulness"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan explores the significance of Jesus cursing the fig tree, emphasizing that this act symbolizes the judgment on Israel for its lack of faith and fruitfulness. He highlights that the fig tree, which had leaves but no fruit, represents the spiritual state of the nation, illustrating that without faith, life and fruitfulness perish. Morgan stresses that Jesus' message to His disciples, 'Have faith in God,' is central to understanding the necessity of bearing fruit in the Kingdom of God. The sermon serves as a reminder for both individuals and nations to reflect on their spiritual fruitfulness and the consequences of failing to live in accordance with God's purpose. Ultimately, the teaching calls for a deep examination of faith and the importance of prayer in producing a fruitful life.

Transcript

Mar 11:1-25.

THIS is admittedly a strange story, strange that is, in the sense of being unusual. Any one reading this Gospel for the first time, who was really and intelligently interested in it as a record of the life and work of Jesus, would inevitably be arrested and surprised. Moreover there are elements in it which have persistently caused difficulties to expositors, and that quite naturally. Cursing and destruction were not the usual methods of Jesus. Let it be at once said that therein is one of the chief values of the story. When Isaiah was denouncing the politicians of his day for their secret intrigues, and foretelling the Divine judgment which must fall upon the nation, amongst other things he said: "Jehovah will rise up as in Mount Perazim, He will be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon; that He may do His work, His strange work, and bring to pass His act, His strange act." When in the Divine economy judgment becomes punishment, chastisement, and necessarily so; it is nevertheless God's strange work, His strange act. So this action of Jesus was undoubtedly strange; yet it is clearly central to this particular paragraph.

Before proceeding to a consideration of the story in its relation to the larger whole of the paragraph; and so to its true value and teaching; there are one or two things to observe about the story in itself.

This is the only account of an exercise of power, on the part of our Lord, which was wholly destructive. There is the story of His destruction of the swine, but that act was linked to the deliverance of a man. Here however is a story, and the only one, of our Lord definitely destroying.

There is no more warrant for criticizing our Lord for destroying a tree for the purpose of teaching, than there is for objecting to a Christmas tree for our children, or the plucking of the petals from a flower in a lesson on botany.

But further, there is no ground for supposing that our Lord did this. I recognize the difficulty of the passage, and suggest that sometimes the simplest and most obvious meaning is the true. Upon this fig tree there ought to have been no leaves. There was such a thing as "the first ripe fig before the summer"; but whenever that appeared, it appeared before the time of leaves. I turn over the page in the Gospel, and find that our Lord Himself used the figure later: "Now from the fig tree learn her parable: when her branch is now become tender, and putteth forth its leaves, ye know that the summer is nigh" (Mar 13:28). This happened undoubtedly in the earliest spring time; before the summer was nigh, before the time of leaves. But seeing that there were leaves, there should have been that first ripe fruit. The Lord came and found that there was no fruit. The tree was precocious, and its precocity in leaves demonstrated the fact that there was no possibility of fruit. It was a tree that had failed in itself, and so became a perfectly just illustration of that which our Lord desired at the moment to teach. Beyond that I shall not go, as to the controversial aspects of the story.

First, it is well that we should remember the time in the ministry of our Lord at which this occurred. Here begins the story of the last week in His earthly life. In this paragraph we have in view three days of that last week. On the first day He entered into the city in triumph, looked at the Temple, and retired at eventide to Bethany. On the second day He journeyed in the morning back again to the city with His own disciples, and on that journey destroyed the fig tree; then having entered into the city and Temple, He cleansed the Temple, and at eventide left the city. On the third day He returned to Jerusalem, and on the way the disciples saw the fig tree withered from the roots, and our present study halts with our Lord's instruction to them in the presence of the withered tree.

Let us bear in mind that this last visit to Jerusalem was official, solemn, condemnatory. Necessarily when we come to this passion week in the life of our Lord, we are almost overwhelmed by such thoughts as those which are suggested by the words of John, "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not." We think of it as the hour of His rejection, as the hour in which the men of His own nation and people finally said, "We will not have this Man to reign over us." All that is true; but it is equally true that this was not merely the hour when His nation rejected Him; it was the hour when He finally rejected that nation. With great solemnity and gravity of manner and method, He arraigned the rulers before Him, compelling them to find verdicts concerning themselves, and pass sentences upon themselves; until in solemn denunciation He actually came to the hour in which He said,-and mark the words now most carefully:-"The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." It was the last, solemn, and awful word of Jesus. We shall come next to the account of how He dealt with the rulers ; but hi this story we are in the presence of preliminary things.

First there was our Lord's definite provocation of demonstration. That also was an unusual method. How often we read that He hid Himself, or escaped from the multitudes. Multitudes thronged and pressed Him wherever He went, attracted by His teaching and the wonders He wrought. He was never hostile to these crowds; and yet He was always turning from them, escaping or sifting them, making it still more difficult, as it would seem, for them to come to Him. He had never definitely provoked anything in the nature of demonstration, but there can be no escape from the conviction that this was exactly what He did at this time. Crowds were there; He might have passed, as He had passed upon other occasions, almost unnoticed into Jerusalem; quietly and meekly walking in the midst of His own. Here He made definite arrangements, the actual carrying out of which must inevitably draw attention to Him, and centre it upon Him. So we see Him, in what we sometimes speak of, and in some senses correctly, as the triumphal entry, drawing attention to Himself, compelling the whole city to know the hour of His arrival.

Then we have this symbolic miracle, wrought in the presence of His own in the hours of the early morning, when by a word He destroyed the fruitless tree; and immediately following it, the instruction to His disciples, when on the following morning Peter drew His attention to the withered tree, and our Lord replied, "Have faith in God," and proceeded with His teaching.

The whole movement here is national; and to the paragraph, this destruction of the fig tree is central and symbolic, as I have no doubt our Lord intended it to be.

"Without giving attention to the details of these stories, that are all so familiar, let us glance at the contextual revelations of the whole scene, in the centre of which this miracle of destruction occurs; in order that we may gather for ourselves the central teaching of this act of Jesus.

We see Him first coming into the city as King. This again is something new, almost unusual in this Gospel. He has been presented to us here as the Servant of God, stripped of His royalties, divested of His dignities, the whole truth concerning His mission crystallized into that wonderful declaration which we have considered, "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve." Here we are introduced to this same Person, still the Servant of God, but the Servant of God in such a way as to draw attention to Himself as King, and acting with a definite authority. As the crowds declared, He came in the name of the Lord, the Representative of Jehovah, the Representative of the God of this people. He came now in national aspect, doing that which He had done individually in the case of the young ruler, putting Himself in the place of God toward these men and toward this nation, drawing attention to Himself by the method of His advent, until there came from those Galilean crowds that quotation of their own ancient psalm, in which they declared the supreme truth, "Hosanna; Blessed is He that cometh in the name of the Lord."

Here He was seen, the Servant of Jehovah, coming to establish His Kingdom; the Kingdom described by Himself when He said He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister; the Kingdom of service, in which positions of greatness were those won by lowliness of service rendered; the Kingdom which was to be founded upon that to which He did in mystery refer, the giving of His own life as a ransom.

So we see Him coming nigh, coming in the majesty of meekness, stripped of all those things which men usually associate with royalty; riding upon an ass. We are often told that this was a royal thing to do; but let it be remembered that there was a clear distinction between animals upon which kings rode, even in the East, and the animal usually described as "a beast of burden" upon which our Lord rode as He came into the city. I suggest one method by which the meekness, the lowliness, the poverty, the absurdity, of this entrance may be understood. In imagination think, not as a Hebrew, but as a Roman; and think of the

triumphal entry of a Roman emperor into his city; and then look at this pageant of poverty, lacking all the things usually associated with royalty and greatness. A procession of poverty, the scattering of the clothes the people wore, the broken branches of the trees, and the shouting of the Galilean mob! So He rode in the dignity of a great meekness, divested of all the things that humanity had for so long associated with Kingship, and still associates with Kingship. It was a pageant of poverty.

He came for investigation. In that first day toward eventide, entering into the Temple, Mark records that "He . . . looked round about upon all things." It was the look of investigation, the look of inquisition, the look of One Who had the right so to look, the look of the supreme and final authority; it was also the look of the heart of an infinite compassion, the look of the eyes bedewed with tears. "He. . . , looked round about upon all things."

What were the conditions that He found? I take His own word spoken on the next day; the Temple "a den of robbers"; its intention violated, and its shelter sought by vice masking under the garb of religion; the precincts of the Temple invaded by money-changers who, contemporary writers tell us, were so nefarious in their practices, that their witness was refused in the courts of law; and all in the name of religion ; the Gentile courts desecrated by the presence there of animals for sacrifice; these things apparently in the interest of religion, the making of religion easy; which is always a perilous thing, contrary to Divine intention, and an evidence of a degenerate people.

He found the spiritual and moral rulers antagonistic to Him, His ideals refused, His interference resented; and preeminently and supremely, the death of faith, the true principle of national life. That is what I think He meant when He said to His disciples, "Have faith in God." He was not giving them the secret for destroying fig trees; but the secret for so living that they should not be destroyed as the fig tree had been destroyed. When the Son of man came to Jerusalem for His final investigation, He found faith missing, He found leaves without fruit.

Now in that atmosphere we turn to this central act of judgment, and without any further dealing with the details, we enquire the meaning of this act, and what our Lord intended to teach His disciples, and His Church for all time.

He meant first to teach that the fruitless must inevitably be destroyed; that life is God-given, and always for the purpose of fruit-bearing. For simplest illustration I turn back to the commencement of my Bible, and find that He made trees, each bearing seed after its kind, for the production of fruit. It is but a figure, a symbol, but it runs down through all Biblical teaching, and especially with regard to this ancient people Israel. The national life was a God-given and God-sustained life, but its purpose was the bearing of fruit. We read that great wail of the psalmist concerning the vine that was planted and broken down, because it failed to bear fruit (Psalms 80). We hear in that lament sung by Isaiah in the fifth chapter the plaintive cry of Jehovah because His people had failed: "He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes;" and of this, the prophet gave his own interpretation and explanation: "He looked for justice, but behold, oppression; for righteousness, but, behold a cry." Because the nation created and sustained by God, had failed to produce the fruit which was the natural outcome of the life which He had thus created and sustained, the decree went forth: "I will tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; I will break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down."

All these things of the past were brought home to this little group of disciples by our Lord in the cursing of the fig tree. If for any reason fruit is not forthcoming, the instrument provided for the bearing of fruit must be destroyed. The tree was the symbol, but the nation was in His mind. He came after the long centuries, to His own, but His own received Him not; and therefore by their refusal to receive Him, and His Kingdom; by the absence of fruit, the necessity was created for the destruction of the instrument. With the morning the disciples saw-mark the significant words, and how the simple and sacred symbol applies,-the tree withered from the roots.

When attention was drawn to this, our Lord gave His disciples the interpretation. The central value of that interpretation is that faith is the principle of fruitfulness. They wondered at His power to destroy, or so it would seem from the simple reading of the story. "Rabbi, behold, the fig tree which Thou cursedst is withered away!" He immediately replied, "Have faith in God." He gave them the secret of making destruction unnecessary; and therefore the secret of removing obstacles to the Kingdom, as He continued, if you have faith, then you shall say to a mountain, Be removed, and cast into the sea. In the life of the nation, when faith perishes, the principle of life perishes, and the possibility of fruitfulness passes away. Even so, for these men-to whom He was about to commit the great responsibilities of the Kingdom of God, taking them from the ancient people, if they were not also to perish, here was the supreme and abiding necessity, "Have faith in God." Fruit was not found in the nation, because life had departed; and life had departed, because faith in God had departed.

He then charged them to pray; for prayer is the expression of faith. He showed them also that the prayer which is the expression of faith, must be the expression of life, mastered by compassion, forgiving, as well as seeking for forgiveness. Prayer love-purified, is the true exercise of faith. So He brought these men-representatives of those who were to follow them, the whole Church of God, to which this great responsibility of the Kingdom of God was to be committed-face to face with this central secret of life. Faith in God is the secret of the life of fruitfulness.

The teaching of this story is for all time, and the application is not merely to the Church. It is specifically a national teaching. It may be well for us as members of the Church of God, and of this nation, to face the simple and yet searching lesson which this act of Jesus reveals. The life which we live as a nation is a life which God has given. All that we are as a nation in all its essential greatness, we owe to Him. By His compassions we have come to be what we are; by His deliverances we have lived in peace and in liberty; by His illumination we have proceeded from strength to strength of understanding and of experience. It would be a work of supererogation to trace the history of this country, but the whole secret may be summarized in a verse from the ancient psalms, "The opening of Thy Word giveth light." Changing the form of rendering in harmony with the real significance of the passage: The going forth, or the letting loose of Thy word giveth light. If in one rapid act, the history of England, and of her most illustrious daughter, the United States of America, be reviewed, it will be seen that anything that has been noble and upward has been the result of the illumination of the people by the going forth of the Word of God. From the moment when our literature was born in the paraphrases of Caedmon, on down through every century, as the light Divine was given, so the people have risen. Oh! how slowly; because how disobediently we have received the Word.

Yet let us remember that everything in our national life that is really great, that has in it the true element of beauty and nobility, is the result of God's compassion and God's deliverance and God's illumination. Our national life, British and American, is verily a Divine creation, and has been sustained by God as surely as was that of Israel of old.

Are we producing fruit after our kind, fruit that is true to the life which God Himself has created and sustained? Surely it is good for us to-day; that in the darkness we may have faith, that under the clouds we may consider, that in the midst of perplexities we may turn ourselves back again to the history of our life and its true significance, and ask ourselves quite solemnly, Does the Son of man, as He comes to us to-day, find fruit?

I thank God that there are other teachings in this same symbolical realm in the New Testament. There is the parable of the barren fig tree, with its last terrible note: If it bear no fruit cut it down. But between the sentence of the proprietor, and that consent of the intercessor, came intercession and work: "Let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it." In the intimate teaching by our Lord of His disciples, speaking within the Church, He referred to pruning and purging in order to the bearing of fruit. In the light of this other teaching upon this solemn act of Jesus, I declare that unless we are responsive to the life which He has created; unless we are responsive to His chastisements, learning to submit ourselves to them unreservedly, we also as nations shall wither from the roots.

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