

19. According to Mark and Luke, how did the common people react to Jesus?
20. Where did Jesus go to spend the night? Who else lived there? When had He been there before? What else took place there connected with the life of Jesus?

SECTION 56

JESUS CURSES FIG TREE AND
TEACHES DISCIPLES FAITH

(Parallel: Mark 11:12-14, 20-25)

TEXT: 21:18-22

18 Now in the morning as he returned to the city, he hungered.
19 And seeing a fig tree by the way side, he came to it, and found nothing thereon, but leaves only; and he saith unto it, Let there be no fruit from thee henceforward for ever. And immediately the fig tree withered away.

20 And when the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, How did the fig tree immediately wither away?

21 And Jesus answered and said unto them, Verily I say unto you, If ye have faith, and doubt not, ye shall not only do what is done to the fig tree, but even if ye shall say unto this mountain, Be thou taken up and cast into the sea, it shall be done. 22 And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. If Matthew knew quite well that the cursing of the fig tree preceded the cleansing of the temple, rather than vice versa, what motives could have seemed valid to him to invert the chronological order of these events?
- b. If Jesus is the Son of God, or God incarnate as the Christians say, why was He hungry? Does God get hungry?!
- c. If Jesus is the Son of God, why did He approach the tree, as Mark admits, "to see if he could find anything on it"? Could he not have already known everything about it by using His presumed prophetic intuition? Should not the fact that He was disappointed by the tree be considered evidence against His possessing supernatural knowledge? If not, why not?
- d. By what right does Jesus permit Himself to gather fruit from a tree that does not belong to Him? What does the Law of Moses

say about this? Is He guilty of theft or presumption, according to Jewish law?

- e. If Mark affirms that “it was not the season for figs” (Mark 11:13), why should Jesus have any right to expect fruit on that tree? Is it not unfair on His part to expect a tree to do what it cannot?
- f. On the basis of what facts could we be sure that Jesus COULD have known that the tree had not produced the figs He expected to find there?
- g. On what basis could He have been certain that it would never produce them in the future?
- h. If this tree belonged to someone, by what right does Jesus destroy the property of others? Or, if the tree does not belong to Him and actually is someone else’s property, how is He actually helping that owner by His action?
- i. By what right can Jesus curse, and so destroy, this “unfortunate” fig tree? Is it a morally conscious being, capable of sinning by not bearing fruit? What had it done to deserve the severity of Jesus’ cursing?
- j. If “the fig tree withered at once,” as Matthew says, why did not the disciples notice it until the next day, as Mark affirms?
- k. Why did the disciples marvel? Should they not have already become thoroughly accustomed to Jesus’ miracles by now?
- l. What is the relationship between a fig tree cursed because it did not bear fruit worthy of its own nature, and prayer that is so effective that does “impossible” things? Jesus’ statement seems to draw such a connection. What is it?
- m. In your opinion, does Jesus offer Himself as a model for the disciples, in the sense that the disciple should be able to wither fig trees like Jesus did? If not, what is the lesson? If so, how many fig trees have you blasted lately?
- n. Men rightly believe that Jesus never showed a mean, selfish spirit. Yet, how are we to understand this incident? Why did He curse the fig tree, if not because He was in a fit of frustrated anger because this tree did not furnish Him what He wanted?
- o. Was Jesus’ promise of moving mountains by faith intended for every disciple, or only for the Twelve? On what basis do you decide this?
- p. What limitations does Jesus place upon His seemingly universal promise to move mountains for any disciple who asks it of Him in faithful prayer?

- q. How does the text help us to understand what attitude we should have when we seek a supernatural (miraculous) blessing from God?
- r. In what sense is it true that Mark's additions concerning forgiveness (Mark 11:25) are implicitly included in Matthew's general statement, "Whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith"?
- s. Affirm or deny and tell why: "The narration of the cursing of the fig tree in this context had the precise function of explaining the sterility of Judaism and of foretelling its proper destiny."

PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Early on the day following the triumphal entry, as Jesus and His disciples were on their way back to the city from Bethany, He felt hungry. In the distance He noticed one solitary fig tree completely leafed out close to the road. So He went up to it to see if He could find anything on it. But when He arrived at the tree, He found nothing on it except leaves. In fact, it was not yet the season for figs.

Then He said to the tree, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again!" May you never bear fruit again!" His disciples were listening. And the fig tree began at once to wither. Then they arrived in Jerusalem and He entered the temple and began to drive out the merchants. . . .

Early the next morning, as they took the same route as the previous day, they saw the fig tree now completely withered away from the roots up. Then Peter, recalling Jesus' words the day before, exclaimed, "Rabbi, look! That fig tree you cursed has dried up!" When the disciples saw it, they exclaimed in astonishment, "How fast it withered!"

"Have faith in God," Jesus urged them, "I can assure you that, if you have faith and do not doubt, not only will you do what has been done to the fig tree. In fact, if you order even this mountain, "Go throw yourself into the sea," without any mental reservations or inward doubts, but believing that what you say will occur, it will be done for you. This is why I tell you that whatever you pray for, act on the assumption that it is already received, and it will be yours! Further, when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your heavenly Father may forgive you your sins."

And they came again into Jerusalem. . . .

SUMMARY

Before cleansing a pretentious temple that served an equally pretentious nation not producing the fruit of righteousness that God the Creator rightly expected of both, Jesus transformed an otherwise commonplace situation into a grave object lesson full of warning. If a fruitless fig tree deserves to be blasted instantly, what fate must await an unbelieving, prayerless, merciless people that, despite all pretensions to the contrary, has made great promises without performance of that one great duty for which it was created, as surely as a fig tree was created to produce figs?!

NOTES

I. PUNISHMENT FROM GOD FOR HYPOCRISY AND BARRENNESS (21:18f.)

A. The Sterile Fig Tree

21:18 **Now in the morning as he returned to the city, he hungered.** **In the morning** means "early" (*proi*), referring to the time of day, not necessarily, as in English, "the next day after today" (Greek: *epaurion*; cf. *proi skotias eti oules* of John 20:1: "early while it was yet dark"). Matthew affirms nothing about chronological sequences. This fact resolves any supposed contradiction between Matthew and Mark regarding the sequence of the events of this chapter. In fact, Mark clarifies the chronology by using the more precise time connection "on the following day" (*epaurion*) "tomorrow, the next day" (Arndt-Gingrich, 283). Thus, Matthew affirms only what time it was when Jesus cursed the tree, without saying on what day it occurred. Mark's chronology clearly notes that the cursing took place on the day after the Messianic Entry into Jerusalem, i.e. very early Monday morning.

As he returned to the city, then, shows that Jesus was coming from Bethany to Jerusalem to cleanse the temple, teach and heal, after spending the night there with the Twelve. (See notes on 12:17; Mark 11:11.) Apparently, He did this every day, since people got up early to hear Him (Luke 21:37f.).

He hungered. (See notes on 8:26.) As is evident from the sequence of events recorded by Mark (11:12-15), Jesus was leading the Twelve to the temple before breakfast. Apparently, He had not eaten in

Bethany before leaving, and so *was hungry*. Because skeptics find it incredible that hospitable people like Mary and Martha should have permitted Him to miss breakfast, we furnish several possible reasons why He might have done so:

1. Had He risen before the others, to go out to pray? (Cf. Mark 1:35.) Had they arisen later, eaten and then joined Him to go to Jerusalem? This would explain why no mention is made of the Apostles' hunger. Again, all 13 men might not have slept together in the one house of Lazarus, Mary and Martha, but in several homes in Bethany, or elsewhere.

Farrar (*Life*, 509, note 1) poses the interesting question whether Jesus really slept in the town of Bethany:

The *eulisthe ekei* of Matthew 21:17 does not *necessarily* imply that He bivouacked in the open air. It is, however, very probable that He did so; for (1) such is the proper meaning of the word (comp. Judg. 19:15, 20). (2) St. Luke says, *eulizeto eis tò òros tò kaloùmenon* (21:37). (3) It was His custom to resort for the night to Gethsemane, where, so far as we are aware, there was no house. (4) The retiring to Bethany would hardly answer to the *ekrùbe ap' autôn* of John 12:36.

He concludes that Jesus probably did not actually stay in the village since His purpose appears to have been concealment, which would hardly have been realized by retiring in the famous house where so many had observed Him at supper earlier. So, if He and the Apostles, slept on the slopes of Olivet near Bethany, the problem of breakfast is to be solved precisely like Jesus started to solve it, by finding it wherever He could.

2. Concern to go to the temple at an early hour to catch the traders at their game, may have pushed Him to leave Bethany before breakfast. Although Jesus enjoyed a good meal on many occasions (Matt. 11:19; Luke 7:33f.) with Pharisees (Luke 14:1ff.) and publicans and sinners (Luke 15:1ff.), the pressure of His activities sometimes left Him little time to eat. (Cf. Mark 6:31.)

Let scoffers sneer at this hungry Messiah! For the believer, this characteristic evidences His authentic humanity. He is truly the Son of man and very much like His brethren in this basic physiological

need. And yet, side by side with this demonstration of Jesus' complete humanness, His hunger, we see His divine power in the instant withering of the fig tree by a simple word of divine might.

21:19 And seeing a fig tree by the way side. When Jesus first noticed it, it was at a distance (Mark 11:13), but, because it was close to the road (Matthew has: *epi tēs hodoû*), it practically invited the hungry passerby to sample its fruit. God Himself had already solved the ethical question whether anyone should pick fruit from others' trees without first asking permission (Deut. 23:24f.). In fact, after the first picking of fruit, anything remaining over must be left on the tree or in the field expressly for the alien, the fatherless and the widow (Deut. 24:19ff.).

He came to it "to see if He could find anything on it" (Mark 11:13). Apparently Jesus did not use His supernatural insight to learn at a distance whether there were fruit there or not. That He could choose not to know certain things should cause no surprise for anyone aware of His unique Sonship. Jesus, when He discovered the things He chose not to know in advance, could be surprised. (See notes on 8:10 and 24:36.) In fact, He approached the tree expecting to taste of the fruit which must surely be on it, since it was "in leaf" (Mark 11:13). It is a false assumption that "our Lord knew, as by His divine power He must, that there was no fruit upon that tree." By starting with this false premise, one must defend Jesus' apparent insincerity when He approached the tree, "playing like" He expected fruit, when, in reality, He knew there was none. On the other hand, substitute this premise with the alternative hypothesis that our Lord **CHOSE NOT TO KNOW** about the tree by supernatural knowledge, and any need to excuse His supposed "insincerity" is eliminated.

He found nothing thereon, but leaves only. Mark 11:13 adds the cryptic phrase: "for it was not the season for figs." In fact, Passover time is near the beginning of spring, whereas the normal "season for figs" is much later on in the summer. Note carefully that Mark relates that "He went to see if He could find ANYTHING (*ti*) on it."

1. Mark's statement that "it was not the season for figs" is obviously not included to suggest that Jesus' conduct was either immoral or irrational, as if Jesus blasted a tree incapable of producing what He (wrongly) expected of it. Mark should be treated as an intelligent, believing writer who could have discerned such an incongruity, had it really existed.

Ferrar (*Life*, 511), citing Josephus (*Wars*, III,10,8), suggested:

On the plains of Gennesaret Jesus must have been accustomed to see figs ripe on the trees every month of the year excepting January and February.

However, Mark's comment on the season renders invalid any hope of finding ripe figs on the tree, since Mark is discussing the growing season for the JERUSALEM area, of which he, quite possibly, was a native, (cf. Acts 12:12).

Rather, by using this expression, Mark shows that Jesus was NOT looking for ripe figs, matured that spring, but for something (*ti*) else. What was He seeking then?

2. Autumn figs from the previous year? Pliny's *Natural History*, 16, 27, describes these late fruits that not uncommonly continued on the trees throughout the winter, even till the arrival of the green leaves of spring. This possibility, however, is less likely than the following, because the tree's proximity to a large population center would have almost guaranteed that all winter figs would have probably been picked by passersby or blown off by the wind (cf. Rev. 6:13).
3. Jesus sought flower figs, the "first figs" or "green figs." (Study Isa. 28:4; Jer. 24:1-3; Hos. 9:10; Mic. 7:1; Nah. 3:12.) This "early fruit" is formed in the springtime (S. of Sol. 2:10-13). In reality, such young fruit is the blossom and appears before the leaves open.

The fruit is of so anomalous a construction that botanists have had to give it a distinct name and place among fruits. It is a hollow receptacle, with minute flowers on its inner side, which later produce the true fruit (*Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, 231).

Edersheim (*Life*, II, 374f.) reminds that the Mishnah (Shebh. iv.7) and the Talmud (Jer. Shebh. 35b, last lines) confirm the fact "that the unripe fruit was eaten, as soon as it began to assume a red color."

Jesus was hoping to find some flower-figs to eat. But as sure as the law: "no flowers, no fruit," He knew, as does any fig grower, that, because there were no flower-figs, there was also not going to be any fig production later on in August.

Nothing but leaves. Leaves were the signal to all that something edible should have been found on that tree. Jesus would not have even bothered, had it not been for that deceptive foliage announcing to any that know fig trees that something to stave off His hunger

was to be found there—if not old figs, at least edible, blossom figs. But to affirm, with McGarvey (*Fourfold Gospel*, 581), that “it was too early for leaves,” is to ignore the nature of that species of fig fully leafed out in precisely that locality in that year.

And He said to it, “May no fruit ever come from you again.”

Mark’s expression “He answered and said to it” (Mark 11:14 *apokritheis eîpen autê*) may be nothing more than a typically Aramaic redundancy (Blass-Debrunner, §4, note 4) and should be left untranslated in English (Arndt-Gingrich, 93), being but a standard formula. Jesus is not, therefore, formally answering the supposed claims which the tree made by its leaves.

That Jesus should address a tree is no surprise to anyone who knows our God who can merely speak a word to His creation and things begin to occur (Gen. 1:22; 3:14). In fact, to see Jesus addressing a sea storm to quiet it, is to witness the same phenomenon. (See notes on 8:26.) The greater surprise is to hear Jesus attribute moral responsibility to the tree. Some object that to treat an impersonal object as something properly subject to punishment or reward is itself an injustice, an observation that causes many either to reject the account as unhistorical, or else reduce it to an entirely parabolic symbol. Three answers are possible:

1. The error lies in man’s failure to understand God’s creation. Morality, by God’s definition, is to function according to His design for our nature and in harmony with the purpose for which we were all created, be we trees or men. Not to do so is immoral and blameworthy. God’s will and design for trees is that each produce “fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds” (Gen. 1:11). Further, such fruit was to serve as man’s food (Gen. 1:29). Therefore, Jesus could justly impute guilt to a tree, however impersonal it might be, because its barrenness did not fulfil the law of its life by responding positively to God’s will that governs the tree’s nature.
2. Under what circumstances would it ever be considered criminal to eliminate a worthless tree?

For example, on what basis could the farmer, in the story of the unfruitful fig tree, be accused of malice or uncultured spite and impatience, when, disappointed by his fig tree’s uselessness, ordered it to be “cut down lest it continue to use up the soil” (Luke 13:7)?

If there is no such case, then should it be thought somehow MORE criminal to remove it by supernatural, rather than by natural, means?

3. Even those who complain about Jesus' attribution of moral responsibility to a tree are often caught doing a similar thing when they talk to inanimate objects, such as those choice remarks aimed at some object of their pleasure or displeasure, their comments addressed to their automobile when it refuses to start on a cold morning and they are late to work, their verbally coaxing a golf ball across the green and into the cup, etc. The difference is that, while they say such things without seriously believing their comments can change anything, Jesus not only said what He thought, but also radically proved His right to say it by changing the state of the object so addressed!

Further, to assume that the fig tree belonged to a local farmer and should not, therefore, have been presumptuously destroyed by Jesus, assumes more than the text affirms.

1. The observation that the tree was located "by the road" (21:19) argues that it was not located in a field, hence really belonged to nobody, was part of no one's patrimony. Jesus neither impoverished nor robbed any man, therefore.
2. Further, by reducing the barren fig tree to instant fireword, Jesus has done any presumed owner a favor, since the tree was good for nothing else.
3. BUT WHO IS THE REAL OWNER OF THAT TREE—and of every other tree on earth, if not Jesus the Lord? Can HE not do with HIS OWN what He wills?!

Let there be no fruit from thee henceforward for ever. Since He had found no flower-figs, He knew that there could be no future fruit-figs. He merely acknowledged that fig tree's condition as barren and, by His utterance, sealed that condition forever. Its time for fruit-bearing had passed. It had been found useless to God and man. Now its judgment and sentencing had come. Two reasons have been noticed that justify Jesus' judgment: the tree's fruitfulness and its falsity.

1. For fruitlessness, because it was contrary to its God-given nature.
2. For pretending, by means of its deceptive leaves, that it had already fulfilled its God-given mission in the world, i.e. to bear fruit. Its external expression was untrue to its inner life.

Jesus' reaction was no precipitous, pettish outburst, but a solemn judgment carefully announced and instantly carried out. If it be true that usefulness to God and men is the only justification for existence on earth, and if the function of justice is to eliminate anything or any person not fulfilling the end for which it was designed, then the justice of Jesus, in preparing this fig tree for removal, is fully justified.

Further, on the basis of Jesus' later explanations (21:20-22), are we to infer that His curse involved His own full confidence that God would execute what Jesus here simply addressed to the fig tree? Yes, because that demonstration of absolute trust which He requires of His followers is exemplified in His own total dependence upon and confidence in the Father at every point. He verbally withered the fig tree in the undivided certainty that it was God's will and that God's power could effect it.

And immediately the fig tree withered away. Matthew's abbreviated account conveys the impression that, even as they watched, the fig tree wilted. Mark's more definite account notes that "the fig tree withered away from its roots" (Mark 11:20). So Matthew is correct to affirm that the **tree withered away immediately**, since the withering began immediately at the roots, but the effect on the branches and leaves would not necessarily have been instantly evident as, in fact, it was the next day. **Immediately** (*parachrêma*), then, does not necessarily mean "in their presence while they were looking," but "relatively soon," since the antithesis of *immediately* would be the slow-motion decay of a degenerate tree.

WHY DID JESUS WITHER JUST THIS ONE TREE?

Were there no other fruitless trees, plants, animals and even people all over Palestine, not to say, the entire world? If so, then why single out this one single fig for exemplary punishment for its fruitlessness?

On the principle of the parsimony of miracles, He probably would not have blasted more than this one encountered in the direct course of His earthly ministry. This differs not at all from His refusal to cure all the sick, raise all the dead or feed all the hungry in Palestine. He dealt with those He encountered and chose to bless; the rest He left. In His ministry it is not recorded that He ever encountered another similar fig tree out of which He chose to make a lesson on faith versus fruitlessness.

But, could He not simply have gone on to search for fruit on other trees? Or perhaps more wonderfully, He could have caused mature

figs to appear on this tree already so rich in leaves. He could have then eaten those. But He did not. Why?

1. He refused to use His divine power for selfish purposes, as during the temptations in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).
2. Every object in God's universe occupies its place (1) by His grace and (2) for His glory (Col. 1:16f.). Nothing has an inalienable right to exist. Everything receives this privilege from the place it occupies in the order of nature. The day had come when this single fig tree must give final reckoning for its fulfilling the purpose for which God created it, fruitfulness. Consequently, Jesus did not violate the tree's nature by creating figs on it contrary to the will of the Father to whom He always gave Son-like obedience. Since the tree did not glorify God by properly fulfilling His purpose, its time of grace had elapsed.

MYTH OR MIRACLE?

It is highly ironic that theologians and Bible commentators who work at explaining this perplexing incident in Christ's life, should prove the very truth of the Lord's teaching given in it! In fact, a neat cleavage separates them into two groups: those who believe that Jesus really withered a fig tree and those who, after all attempts at explaining the story in naturalistic terms, just do not really think it could have taken place. Barclay (*Matthew*, II,278) simply states:

We may well believe that Jesus used the lesson of a diseased and degenerate fig tree to say to the Jews—and to us—that uselessness invites disaster, and profession without practice is doomed. That is surely what this story means, for we cannot think of Jesus as literally and physically blasting a fig tree for failing to bear fruit at a season when fruit was impossible.

Others tend to consider Luke 13:6ff., the parable of the unfruitful fig, as so parallel in thought to the withering of the fig tree, that the miracle must be considered to be an "enacted parable." Radaelli (*Lettura di un miracolo come introduzione all'intendimento del miracolo*, 47,52f.) pontificates:

The account of a "parable" does not alter the content of the kerygma, i.e. it does not hinder the communication of a precise message *even if it is presented as a historical "event" because of*

certain editorial concerns. It is especially this nucleus of editorial aims that must be preserved, it is this teaching of faith that must be considered as primary and essential, *not its channel by which it comes to us.* We must learn what the Evangelist means by the narration of the miracle of the fig. *It does not interest us for now whether this narration is history or not.* (Emphasis added.)

For Radaelli it did not bother the conscience of Matthew or Mark to transform into a miracle what must originally have been but a parable, as in Luke. It makes little difference whether Jesus ever concretely withered the fig tree or not. The important thing is to learn the "truth" He intended to teach. Rather than reject the Evangelists' account as unhistorical or as intentional fabrication of facts simply because of some problems involved in a literal interpretation of the text, would it not be far more reasonable to argue that these "scandalous" problems, rather than furnish reasons for its rejection, are proof of its historicity? Matthew and Mark could have foreseen the difficulties, yet they included them. In fact, these problems evidence the scandal of Christ who smashes many human notions of what the Messiah "must" be, not merely for ancient Israel but for modern scholars too.

IS THIS A MIRACLE OR A PARABLE?

Is there any basis in the text for thinking Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an acted parable, intended by Jesus as an ominous warning to the fruitless Jewish nation soon to be destroyed for its barrenness? On whose authority may we confidently affirm that "the fig tree is a common metaphor for Israel"? None of the proof texts usually cited so affirm, since they often include other trees and vines as well. (Cf. Jer. 8:13; Ezek. 17:24; Mic. 7:1; Hos. 9:10, 16; 10:1, etc.) But granted that "fig tree" were a metaphor for "Israel" in every other context, what would make it so in THIS one? The following supposed parabolic parallels?

PARABOLIC PARALLELS

1. The fig tree event is the literary framework within which the temple cleansing occurs. Can there have been no deliberate intention of the Lord to follow precisely this sequence? However, the Lord did not state His reasons for choosing this particular sequence of events.

2. Both the fig tree and the temple of Israel appear lacking in some way: figs on the tree, dignity and righteousness in the temple.
3. Both provoke in Jesus an energetic reaction that borders on violence.
4. Both were physically stricken and, after some time had passed, destroyed.

However convincing these parallels seem, it must be stated that Jesus did not turn His miracle into a parable. In fact, He said nothing in our text about the Jewish nation, city or temple. It is highly significant that, when questioned about the fig tree's sudden demise, He turned directly to the instruction of the Twelve about their own faith, prayer and forgiveness. Not one word came from Jesus' lips concerning a presumed parabolic significance of His miracle. The REAL LESSON Jesus considered far more urgent than talk about fruitless Israel was the lesson of the FAITH and PRAYER of His own disciples. THIS lies at the heart of all fruitlessness.

A sensitive Jewish reader would perhaps have intuited the following lessons:

1. The danger of spiritual sterility
2. The authority and power of the Lord who can wither a sterile tree by merely a word.
3. The operational value of faith to accomplish the impossible.
4. Would he have also specifically grasped the sterility of Judaism from this event alone? Perhaps from the context of the temple cleansing and the following debates and Jesus' condemnation of the leaders of Israel. In fact, in Jesus' larger context (21:33f.), He did discuss a people that did not "produce the fruits" of the Kingdom.

Our ability to see a parable here arises, therefore, not from something in the text at hand, but from our intuitive appreciation of His many lessons on fruitfulness and barrenness already given. (Cf. Matt. 3:10; Luke 13:6-9; see notes on "The Importance of Fruit-bearing" at the end of this volume.)

So it is MEN who turn this miracle into a parable by reflecting on its meaning. Their psychological process proceeds somewhat as follows: if Jesus can so rigorously curse a fruitless fig tree, what must be the destiny of a fruitless people who do not produce what their Creator expects. To every believer this must be a warning that guarantees the damnation of uselessness and the punishment of proud promises without performance. If God eliminates useless, unfruitful

creatures with a suddenness and severity that surprises the observer, and if He does it with indisputable justice because of the rich opportunities to produce what, by their nature, they could be expected to produce, **WHAT WILL HE DO WITH ME**, if I too do not produce what, according to **MY** nature, I am rightly expected to produce to His satisfaction?! (Cf. John 15:1-11.) But this conclusion is not really based on the parallel, but upon other revelations of Jesus given elsewhere. (Cf. Matt. 25:14-46, etc.) He said nothing directly about **OUR** fruitlessness in our text.

It is only on this basis that the incident's lessons find application in the life of Israel. Whereinsofar the Jewish nation of Jesus' day showed a rich profession of zeal toward God, even to the point of enthusiastically welcoming His Messiah, but did not produce the fruit God desired, just so far it would be condemned as worthless. While the cursing of the fig tree anticipates the clear teaching of three parables that describe the destiny of those among God's people who will not have done His will (21:38—22:14), and while this episode serves also to introduce Jesus' severe denunciation of the Pharisees (chap. 23), it is really out of men's analysis of Jesus' judgment and His rationale for it, that they derive this parabolic sense, not from something stated in the text.

B. The Polluted Temple (21:12-17)

It is to be remembered that, at precisely this point (according to Mark's chronology), the Lord entered into His temple and cleaned out its ungodly traffic. In the estimation of many, this fact bears on the interpretation of the withering of the fig tree, as its perfect, necessary corollary, being also a scathing judgment upon a pretentious, but barren, religion. However, it is better to consider the cleansing of the temple as simply one more illustration of the principle implicit in the withering of the fig tree, rather than "a parabolic prophecy" of it.

II. POWER FROM GOD THROUGH FAITH, PRAYER AND MERCY (21:20-22)

A. The Disciples' Surprise (21:20; Mark 11:20f.)

21:20 **And when the disciples saw it**, a fully day had passed (Mark 11:19f.). Once again they are returning to Jerusalem from Bethany

where they had lodged the previous night (Matt. 21:17). Why did they not immediately notice the tree's withering?

1. If on the evening of the day the tree was cursed, they returned to Bethany by the same route as that taken in the morning, they may have passed the tree in the dark without noticing the change that had taken place in the tree either then withered or in its final stages of withering. Next day, they took the same trail and saw it by daylight.
2. McGarvey (*Evidences of Christianity*, 90) taught that

In Mark's account . . . the disciples are represented as not seeing the tree until the next morning after the curse was pronounced on it, although they went out to Bethany the next afternoon, and we should suppose that they passed by it (11:14, 19f.). This appears quite strange, if not unaccountable, until we inspect the route of travel between Jerusalem and Bethany, and find that there are two different paths, by either of which a person may pass up the western side of the Mount of Olives from one place to the other. One of the paths is very steep, while the other has a gradual slope. The steep path is the shorter of the two, and the one which a person would take naturally when coming down the mountainside toward the city, while the other would be naturally preferred by one going the other way. Now Jesus was coming into the city when He cursed the tree, and this accounts for the failure of the disciples to see it as they went out, and also for their seeing it when they came in the next morning. A coincidence so minute as this, and so artless, can be the work of none but an accurate writer.

But the disciples saw it! Brown, dry leaves stirring in the springtime breeze around the base of the now-bare, fruitless fig tree would catch their attention as it stood out in marked contrast to all that was green around it, as well as in contrast to its previously luxuriant foliage the previous day. They *saw it* and so become proof against modern skeptics who deny what they themselves did not see!

They marvelled, saying, How did the fig tree immediately wither away? A most remarkable reaction for Twelve men gifted with so many experiences of Jesus' divine power! How is such a response possible?

1. They marvelled, not because they had seen no miracles before, but because this was an unexpected evidence of His supernatural

power in a different sector of nature. Although they had witnessed countless wonders performed in the area of human sickness and death, demon-possession, in the forces of nature and some of its animal life, this was their first experiences with a miracle involving a tree.

2. Until now, Jesus' mighty works had been characterized by mercy and kindness. This one surprises the Twelve by the immediateness and completeness of the Lord's punitive judgment. Their reaction is entirely free from any criticism of His right to destroy the tree. Rather, they are astonished by the marvelous rapidity with which His curse is carried out.

How did the fig tree immediately wither away? (*pôs parachrêma exerânthe he sukê*) Most translators agree in rendering this Greek phrase as a question, implying the Twelve's desire to know the process. But did not they, of all people, already know that God could destroy the tree at the word of Jesus? Again, we must discern in what sense Jesus' response (21:21) really deals with their reaction. These can be understood in two ways:

1. **AS A QUESTION:** Disciples: "How did the tree wither?" Jesus: "By faith in God!" But must we suppose that the Twelve, who had apparently never before expressed any desire to know the inner workings of their Master's divine power, only now blurt out this impulsive question that delves into the mechanics of supernatural intervention? This is possible, even though His answer would be more indirect. "Have faith and doubt not" transfers their attention from idle curiosity about the physical mechanics of the supernatural to a proper emphasis on the spiritual connection with the power of GOD who makes such wonderful deeds possible. This shift of emphasis is evident when it is remembered that faith in itself does not directly produce a miracle. It is God Himself who does it. Faith is only the moral condition of His human agent or of the miracle's recipient. It may well be that Jesus intended NOT to answer the disciples question as they intended it, in order to remind them of their position as disciples and servants of God. Thus they had to leave the physical mechanics of supernatural intervention in His hands, while depending on His power to perform such wonders.
2. **AS AN EXCLAMATION:** Disciples: "How rapidly the tree withered!" Jesus: "By faith in God you too can do even more

marvelous things than this! Anyone who has faith can do that and more!"

a. An exclamation is grammatically possible:

(1) The question mark is not inspired, but a translator's choice interpretation.

(2) The Greek word order permits the phrase to be rendered as an exclamation.

(a) Compare the use of the interrogative adverb *pôs* rendered as a correlative adverb, making exclamations in passages like Mark 10:23f. = Luke 18:24; Luke 12:50; John 11:36. (Cf. Blass-Debrunner, §436, however, cf. §396 mentioned below; Arndt-Gingrich, 740, §3 article *pôs*; Rocci, 1634)

(b) Because *pôs* had begun to assume the function of *hoti* to introduce indirect discourse (Blass-Debrunner, §396, and Matt. 19:23 in contrast with Mark 10:23f.), our sentence could also be translated, "And seeing (it), the disciples marveled, saying, 'The fig tree withered suddenly!'" *Pôs* (= *hoti*) functions practically as quotation marks. But even so, the disciples' comments prove to be a series of exclamations, so the practical result is the same. (Cf. also Mark 11:21.)

b. An exclamation is at least as much in harmony with the disciples' astonishment as a question, if not more so.

c. Mark's parallel citation of Peter's words (Mark 11:21) contains exclamations: "Master, look! The fig-tree you cursed has withered!"

d. Several translators recognize the disciples' reaction as an exclamation, among whom the Berkeley Version by G. Verkuyl, the Twentieth Century New Testament and J. B. Phillips in English, and the Bibbia Concordia in Italian.

So rendered, the exclamation, which by its character still demands an explanation from Jesus, leads quite naturally into Jesus' explanation (21:21f.), since the disciples are no longer thought to be seeking that information which could have been drawn from their own rich experiences with the Lord. Rather, their astonishment (*ethaùmasan*) is based, not on inexplicable ignorance of Jesus' supernatural power, but on the mind-boggling rapidity (*pôs parachrema!* = "How swiftly!") with which His curse was carried out.

B. The Lord's Lesson (21:21f.; Mark 11:22-25)

1. "Unwavering confidence in God does achieve truly amazing results."

21:21 If you have faith and doubt not. The Lord now brings His men into fellowship with Him in His power by sharing with them the secret behind such marvelously instantaneous results. Rather than explain how He worked the miracle, drawing attention to the mechanics, rather than justify His severe judgment on the tree, drawing attention to Himself, Jesus turned the spotlight on the fundamental principle of confidence in God and dependence on Him as the source of all true power. "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22) beautifully summarizes Jesus' message and the basic goal of His ministry. He aimed to build faith in God among all who follow Him. He is not so much interested that we believe in the power of prayer as He is that we have faith in God who answers them, a confidence that trusts the power, wisdom and goodness of Him who can enable us to do the impossible instantly. He is so dedicated to producing real faith, that He expresses Himself here in the most vivid and encouraging language possible.

Further, because it was contextually JESUS' miracle that is the basis of His encouragement to believe God unwaveringly, may we not also infer that it was His own confident trust in the Father that stands at the base of His power? And did not the Father hear Him on many occasions precisely because of His reverent submission and His learned obedience? (Cf. Heb. 5:7ff.; John 4:34; 11:38ff.)

You will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it will be done. Jesus argues from the lesser to the greater, inasmuch as cursing fig trees could be considered less impressive than ordering huge mountains around. In fact, physical removal of mountains is literally possible for a God who can do anything at the request of His believing children. And yet, how much actual rearranging of earth's geography is really intended by the Lord or understood by the Twelve? To understand Jesus' language as figurative is not to discount His words as unimportant. Even if He did not intend His men to understand Him literally, He did intend to be taken seriously! Rather, His words are proverbial for achieving what is humanly impossible. By saying *this mountain*, referring to the Mount of Olives on which they were then standing, He rendered this common proverb even more vivid.

If it be asked how the removal of figurative mountains could be psychologically superior to the stupendous miracle Jesus had just performed by blasting the fig tree, the answer is to be found in a later promise somewhat parallel in thought (John 14:12). His miracles were merely the scaffolding which supported His claims. But what is all-important for Jesus is the proclamation of His message throughout the world, because what actually saves men is this message, not His miracles. So, when His people would in faith move mountains of unbelief and hindrances by gospel proclamation all over the earth, thus making other believers in Him and saving them for eternity, this is far greater in His eyes.

Study Jesus' syntax: **You will not only do . . . to the fig tree, but even . . . to this mountain.** Both a cursing and a removing of impossible barriers would be within the province of believing disciples, a fact that has several ramifications:

1. There would be some negative, difficult work ahead for them. They would not find their discipleship unencumbered, but plagued by what cried out for cursing, and their progress hampered by difficulties to be removed.
2. Such a difficulty ministry could not be marked by presumptuous self-confidence nor by self-doubt and fear. Rather, all decisions they must make must occur within the larger context of faithful dependence upon God.

If you have faith and doubt not: how badly these men needed this admonition is illustrated by the failure of some of them to cast out a demon precisely because of their lack of faith and prayer. (See notes on Matt. 17:19f.; Mark 9:28f.) This unwavering faith in God was the absolutely essential condition which would connect them with the power of the living God.

Even if "moving mountains" is figurative rather than literal, this does not detract from the fact that these very disciples had already done tasks in harmony with God's will that would have proven impossible for doubters to perform, tasks just as impossible as causing a mountain to plunge suddenly into the sea. Peter had walked on the water by faith (Matt. 14:29). In Jesus' name the Twelve had conquered demons (Luke 10:17). Later these same men would plunge into a busy, miracle-filled ministry. (Acts 2:1-12, 43; 3:6-9; 5:12-16; 9:32-43; 19:11, 12, etc.) In fact, to believe that a handful of believers

belonging to an obscure people dominated by the super-power of Rome, yet without substantial economic resources, the assistance of diplomatic influence or military forces, could somehow change the direction of world history by the unique might of a preached message, is tantamount to believing that, with a single, simple gesture, a man could order a mountain to throw itself into the ocean!

2. "Trusting Prayer, Confident of God's Concern and Power, Is Sure To Be Answered" (21:22)

21:22 **And all things whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive.** Three major questions are involved in the correct understanding of this text:

1. To what extent should *all things whatever ye shall ask* be considered universal and to what extent limited?
2. If *believing*, and its parallel, "doubt not" (21:21), are the absolute minimum requirements limiting the apparently universal promise of Jesus, what, specifically, must be believed and not doubted?
3. When is it that *ye shall receive*? Must every believing prayer have an instantaneous, positive response from God?

Failure correctly to understand Jesus will lead to false expectations and consequent disappointments. Lest the unprepared disciple should be misled to think that "you can get anything—*anything* you ask for in prayer—if you believe," it is appropriate to study everything Jesus affirmed about proper praying, since His various statements furnish a context within which to comprehend these astonishingly unqualified promises in our text. (Cf. Matt. 6:5-15; 7:7-11; 6:19-34; 9:38; 17:20; 18:19f.)

1. Jesus will personally answer prayers addressed in His name (John 14:13f.). Since His name is the symbol for all that this name stands for, all that He had revealed about Himself, then only those prayers formulated in harmony with His self-revelation have any hope of an answer. His name is no magic formula tacked onto prayer to guarantee its being heard. "In His name" means "on the basis of HIS worthiness" and in harmony with His willingness to loan us the use of His good name.
2. Jesus will answer prayers "that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). No prayer can be considered that does not seek

God's glory. This desire to glorify the Father automatically screens out our unworthy, selfish requests. Since God decides by what standard His glory is truly enhanced, this implies that our praying must be in harmony with His will.

3. God will answer those who prove themselves to be friends of Jesus, a fact demonstrated by their obvious obedience to Him in their love for one another, their willingness to work together and in the abiding results of their lives (Matt. 18:19; John 15:12-17; I John 3:21f.).
4. God will answer the prayers that meet the scrutiny of Him whose personal intercession is absolutely essential to their being granted a hearing with God (John 16:23, "in my name"; I John 2:1; I Tim. 2:5). Obviously, such prayers must accord with the nature and will of Christ. Nevertheless, the believer is sure to be heard, if he prays for what Christ wants! To pray well, we must study HIM HIS goals, HIS desires, HIS methods, HIS intentions.
5. Jesus promises answer for those who are deeply and humbly conscious of their own limitations, their lack of wisdom, their sinfulness, their inability to foresee solutions, their need for knowledge and their need for an intercessor (Matt. 18:3f., 11; Rom. 8:26f.).
6. God will answer prayer according to His will (I John 5:14f.). When we learn to desire what He desires, nothing good will be withheld from us (Ps. 37:4). However God has limited His own freedom to grant just any and every prayer we pray. These limitations express His own character and program for world redemption. They also automatically restrict what we may reasonably expect from Him, no matter how trusting and free from doubt we think we are. God has deliberately stated His will in Scripture, so that we can learn both to pray and act aright. He will answer in harmony with all of these facets of His will that bear on the many, complex questions involved in any request we make:
 - a. God's will is knowable (Eph. 1:9; 3:2-6; 5:10, 17; 6:6; Col. 1:9; 4:12).
 - b. God's will is revealed only to humble disciples (Matt. 11:25f.).
 - c. God's will is grasped by mind-transforming self-sacrifice (Rom. 12:1, 2).
 - d. Scripture came by God's will (II Peter 1:21). Paul, for example, was an Apostle by God's will (Col. 1:1, 25-29) and what he writes is the Lord's will (I Cor. 14:37; I Thess. 2:13; Acts 20:27).
 - e. God's will is possible for man to do it (Acts 13:22, 36), although

difficult (Heb. 10:36). He even furnishes the gracious power to help us do it (Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:20f.)! Even after Satan's victories (II Tim. 2:26)!

- f. God wants everyone to be saved (II Peter 3:9; I Tim. 2:4; Luke 12:32; Eph. 1:5). God wills that only Jesus deliver men (Gal. 1:3, 4; Acts 2:23; John 6:39f.) and He chose to save by means of the Gospel (I Cor. 1:21). He finds no pleasure in cowardly backsliders (Heb. 10:38). Spiritual kinship to Jesus is judged by obedience to God's will (Mark 3:35).
- g. God wills that we be thoroughly pure (I Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 10:10; 12:14; John 17:15-19), sanctified by obedient faith (James 1:21f.; Heb. 11:6; 10:7, 10; I Peter 1:22-25). God hates sin (I Cor. 10:5).
- h. God wills that we live a full Christian life (Rom. 14:17f.), useful to others (Heb. 13:15f.).
- i. God wills that we show His same deep concern for the weakest (Matt. 18:14 in context). The body of Christ is also set up like He wants it, even with its weakest members to care for (I Cor. 12:18, 24-28).
- j. God's judgment is on the side of mercy for those who show mercy to others (Matt. 9:13; 5:7; 6:12, 14f.; 18:33, 35).
- k. God's will is the final arbiter for distributing His gifts (Heb. 2:4; Rom. 12:3-8; I Cor. 12:11).
- l. God may will that we suffer for Christ's sake (Phil. 1:29; I Peter 2:20; 3:17; 4:19). This may involve not giving us what would eliminate the suffering.
- m. God wills that we be thankful in all circumstances (I Thess. 5:18).
- n. God wills that we silence His opponents by our good life (I Peter 2:15; John 8:46).
- o. God wills that we love Him above all, and our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:28-33).
- p. God is pleased by Jesus and He becomes our example (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; I Peter 2:21-25). But He prayed, "Not my will but yours be done" (Matt. 26:39, 42). His goal must be ours (Heb. 10:7, 9; I Peter 4:1, 2).
- q. God wills to provide our every necessity, our daily bread (Matt. 6:11, 19-34; 10:29-31; Phil. 4:19; I Peter 5:7).
- r. God's will includes all creation (Rev. 4:11). In order to run an orderly universe, He may not choose to answer some of our prayers that require His creating disorder to do it.

- s. God detests this godless world and all it offers, all that is based on the appetites, greedy ambitions and all that men think glamorous (I John 2:15ff.).
- t. God's many-sided will may involve other principles as well. Consider these Old Testament expressions: Deut. 10:12ff.; I Sam. 15:22; Ps. 40:6-8; 50:7-23; 51:16ff.; 66:18; 69:30f.; Prov. 15:29; Isa. 1:15ff.; Jer. 7:21ff.; Hos. 4:1; 6:4-6; Amos 5:21ff.; Mic. 6:8.

The above texts lead inescapably to the conclusion that God will not give absolutely EVERYTHING that is asked for in prayer by the sincere believer.

Jesus does not mean that anyone may, without any basis in God's word, fancifully hope that God unquestioningly hand over anything His misguided disciple requests, merely on the basis of that disciple's ability to develop a psychological confidence that God will so act. This would reduce God to be the justifier of the unjustifiable gift, the automatic contributor to man's delinquency by mechanically conceding him everything he could develop enough psychological "faith" to convince himself God would give (cf. James 4:3). Our Lord offers no magical mechanism that justifies our expecting automatic blessing to be had just by praying.

Rather, Jesus refers to that faith that comes by hearing the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). We must believe the rich promises God has already given and frame our praying accordingly (II Peter 1:3f.). This faith must have an objective basis, not only in the truthfulness of God, but also in what He has actually said. We must also be prepared for God's negative responses. His refusal to take some of our prayers literally is far better than all we could have asked or imagined (Eph. 3:20; II Cor. 12:7-10). What if we mistakenly ask for a serpent instead of a fish, a stone instead of bread or a scorpion in place of an egg (cf. Luke 11:9-13; Matt. 7:7-11)? When we do not know how we ought to pray, we need the help of God's Spirit (Rom. 8:26). SHOULD we really receive what we pray for, in our ignorance *believing* it for our good, when to receive it would really harm us? It is a good thing that God does not answer some of our prayers! We must keep open alternatives to let God answer as HIS wisdom leads. This kind of believing trusts that what God has said, He really will bring to pass (Rom. 4:21). Consequently, we are not at liberty to expect or require of Him anything that He has not already indicated in His Word. In fact, it would be highly instructive to compare the few things

He has NOT promised with the foregoing list of things He HAS. But for anything He has committed Himself to, we may and must ask in full certainty (James 1:5-8).

Because of His faithfulness revealed in His Word, our confidence in Him leads us to depend upon His will. This persuasion is not that if we desire a thing ardently enough to pray about it, we shall surely have it. Rather, we believe that God's unlimited power guarantees His ability to answer our prayer, if our requests coincide with what He wills (I John 5:14f.). The faith required is our unshakable certainty of His perfect dominion over every element involved in the total answer to our prayer. But, if to us He is truly LORD, then HE decides, not we ourselves (Luke 17:5-10).

Doubt not (21:21) "in heart" (Mark 11:23), the reverse side of unconditional faith in God's promises, is the inability to move with certainty and decision by praying for and expecting what God committed Himself to deliver. *Doubt* considers as impossible, or at least uncertain, that what we pray for will actually occur (cf. Mark 9:22ff.). Despite God's promise to provide a certain thing to every Christian, the doubter is inwardly divided in that he both trusts and does not trust God to give it (cf. James 1:6-8). *Doubt* makes the distrustful person his own worst enemy in that it divides his basis of certainty at the very moment he must approach God with his whole heart. Because faith is the basis of man's communion with God, and because doubt divides man and weakens his confidence, doubt is naturally the sin that breaks communion with God. *Doubt* is hesitating when we ought to be acting confidently on questions God has already decided and announced in His Word.

Doubts are mental reservations. While we must have no mental reservations about anything God has said, they can certainly hinder our "believing that what you say will occur." We may be troubled by mental reservations about whether we should even ask Him to provide certain things:

1. How should we approach prayer for certain things about which we may have some doubts as to the true usefulness or value to us in our ministry to Him? Pray for wisdom, not easy answers (James 1:5ff.).
2. How should we ask concerning a choice we suspect to be forbidden in Scripture, but at the moment, remain uncertain whether we read it in the Bible or merely imagined it or were taught it by men? We must refuse to participate in it until our conscience is at rest,

assured by God's truth. (Cf. Rom. 14:23; I Cor. 8:1-7; John 7:16f.; 8:31f.)

3. Even if certain things have not been forbidden in Scripture, they may not have been specifically promised to all Christians. This may undermine our confidence and create mental reservations about asking for them.

If Jesus did not promise miraculous gifts to every Christian as an expression of the Holy Spirit's work in each one, can the modern Christian truly pray, without some mental reservation, for such gifts as supernatural inspiration to prophesy, power to heal others instantly or any other special gift? (Cf. Acts 9:40!)

4. We certainly should have mental reservations about putting God to unnecessary tests by our pleading that certain events under His undisputed control should occur, events which He has not promised to bring about. (Remember how Jesus handled Satan's quotation of Scripture promises of help for the godly! Matt. 4:6f.)

Jesus' presuppositions behind His dictum, then, are: after you have examined God's will to discern what He has actually promised to give you His child, after you have learned in what sense He intended His promises (good hermeneutics), after you are certain you have understood whether the specific promise in question applies to you personally and not to the whole Church in general or to special functionaries therein, THEN you can pray in full confidence that what you ask for is already yours, guaranteed by the faithfulness of a God who cannot lie to you.

1. This way the mental reservations based on ignorance of God's will are eliminated by knowledge. (Study Col. 1:9-12; Eph. 1:15-19; Phil. 1:9-11; 3:12-16, esp. 15.)
2. This way the mental reservations based on distrust of God are exposed for the unbelief they really are (Heb. 11:6).
3. This way no prayer will be prayed for things God has not promised in His Word.
4. But even before this, during it and thereafter, we have the Spirit's help with our ignorance and weakness (Rom. 8:26f.) as well as that of our High Priest, Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:25; 4:14ff.).

In short, Jesus is saying, "Believe what you pray! Do not ask God for what you do not yourself believe possible! Let your prayers reflect your true view of God!"

How peculiarly appropriate was this teaching of Jesus:

1. With regard to the disciples' immediate perplexities! Why Jesus should have claimed Messianic dignity so publicly and yet just as publicly refused to do what they expected an earthly Christ to do, must have seemed highly contradictory to them.
2. Contemporaneously, the fact that He did not precipitously turn such terrible power against the evil men of that day pointed to His deep mercy that furnished them opportunity to repent. As the disciples reflected later on Jesus' self-surrender to His enemies, they could have thought: "Why, He could have withered them as easily as He blasted that fig tree—with just a word!" This has a dual benefit:
 - a. It would tend to strengthen their faith in the face of the apparent triumph of evil. Jesus dramatically assured them of the infinite power which God could mobilize on behalf of His people any-time they asked for it believing.
 - b. To the extent they could appreciate the horrible firepower at His disposal but never used in His own self-defense, it would exalt His marvelous meekness and patience and the greatness of His grace. His meekness became their standard of behavior under fire. (Contrast Luke 9:54f.)
3. With regard to the great obstacles yet future! The blasted fig tree stood as a concrete symbol of God's power to remove the most formidable barriers ever to stand in their way. How exceedingly helpful must have been Jesus' promise to them as they remembered His words and lived in the confidence that everything needful to establish God's Kingdom was theirs by faith in a God who moves mountains that stand in the way! (Cf. Zech. 4:7.)

Had they had but eyes to see it, real faith in God had already marvelously moved mountains of doubt and fear from the disciples' minds, letting them see Jesus for what He really is.

FACT QUESTIONS

1. In what order does Matthew present his account of the cursing of the fig tree and of the cleansing of the temple?
2. In what sense does it seem that Matthew contradicts the testimony of Mark in regard to the order of events?
3. Furnish a plausible explanation that resolves the apparent contradiction between the two accounts.

4. What indications does Matthew furnish in his text that show that he knew he was reorganizing the order of the two events?
5. Where had Jesus been when He saw the fig tree?
6. Where was He going?
7. At what time of day did He see the fig tree?
8. According to Matthew, where precisely was the fig located?
9. What characteristics of the tree induced Jesus to approach it?
10. In what period of the year did this event occur?
11. Tell what you know about fig trees that assists in understanding this story.
12. With what words did Jesus curse the fig tree?
13. According to Matthew, what happened when Jesus pronounced the curse upon the tree?
14. According to Mark, when did they discover the effect produced in the fig tree by Jesus' words?
15. Explain why the disciples saw the effect of the cursing only at a later time, as Mark describes it. What elements in Mark's account suggest a rapid, but gradual, process involved in the withering?
16. What was the reaction of the disciples when they saw the effect of the cursing of the fig tree? Who voiced their reaction?
17. According to Jesus, what is the lesson to be learned from this event?
18. On what mountain were Jesus and His disciples standing when He spoke of moving "this mountain"?
19. Is there any basis for the assumption of many that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree is an acted parable intended by Jesus to refer to the fruitless Jewish nation soon to be destroyed for its barrenness? If so, what is that basis? If not, why not?

SECTION 57:

JESUS MEETS CHALLENGES TO HIS AUTHORITY: THREE PARABLES OF WARNING

(Parallels: Mark 11:27—12:1; Luke 20:1-8)

TEXT: 21:23-32

A. Jesus' Authority Challenged

23 And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said,