

The Parable of the Fig Tree

The parable of the barren fig tree is found in the Gospel of Luke, chapter thirteen. According to Luke, Jesus had been speaking to a large crowd. He was asked about an incident in which some people from the north of Israel were killed by Pontius Pilate, and in His response, He spoke of a tower that had collapsed and killed eighteen people. These incidences led into His telling the parable of the barren fig tree, so before focusing on the parable, it's helpful to read what preceded it.



There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed

them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:1-5)

When people told Jesus about a terrible thing that had happened, His response addressed a common belief at that time, which was that when tragedies occurred, the people involved were receiving "measure for measure," and these things happened to



them because of their sins. He asked rhetorically if the murdered Galileans were worse sinners than others, and then answered His own question with a resounding no. He brought up the same question using a different example, and once again said that no, those unfortunate people who died were not greater sinners than others.

Jesus made the point that these tragedies show how fragile life is, and that it can end unexpectedly; thus He stressed the importance of repenting, of receiving the forgiveness which only God can give.

He went on to tell the parable:

"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?'" (Luke 13:6-7)

Fig trees, which are mentioned 41 times within Scripture, grow to between four and six meters high (13–19 feet). In Israel, their fruit ripens in August and September.

In some instances in Scripture, the fig tree represents Israel.

Like grapes in the wilderness, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on the fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers. (Hosea 9:10)

A nation has come up against my land, ...It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; (Joel 1:6-7)



While the parable tells us that the man waited three years for the fruit, it could be that those listening saw it as longer. In Leviticus, the Lord had commanded that no one should eat the fruit of a newly planted tree for four years.

When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the LORD. But in the fifth year you may eat of its fruit. (Leviticus 19:23-25)

Since the owner wouldn't have expected to eat any of the fruit for the first four years, the listeners may have considered that the tree had been in the ground for seven years, the first four during which he wasn't allowed to eat the fruit, and then three more. In any case, this man had patiently waited a substantial amount of time, but now he was rightly fed up, as it had been so long and the tree took up space in the vineyard, robbing the ground and other plants of nutrients. The owner's judgment was that the vineyard would be better off without the tree.

[The vinedresser] answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:8-9)



The man who cared for the vineyard suggested giving it one more season, during which he would give it extra attention, and if that didn't work, then at the owner's command it would be cut down. Similar to some other parables, we're not told of the outcome—we don't know if the owner allowed this extra year or not.



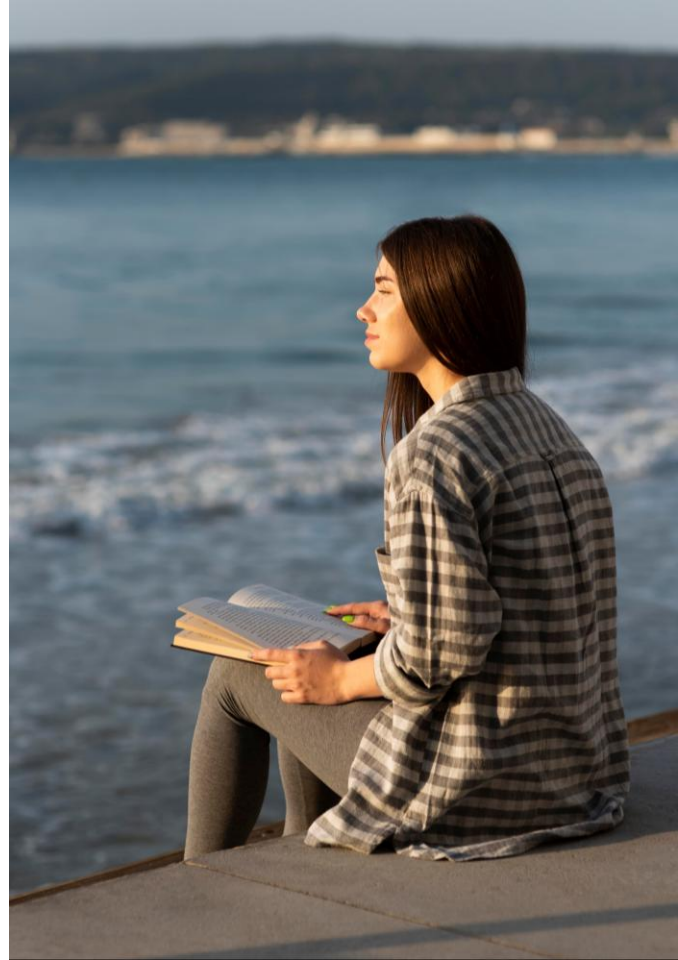
Those who write about the parables of Jesus generally interpret this parable in one of two ways. The first is that the parable is speaking about the nation of Israel or Israel's leadership. According to this interpretation, Jesus was making the point that the people of Israel and/or the religious leadership needed to repent before it was too late. God, in His mercy, was giving them some time to do so, but at the end of that time, judgment would come, and it did. Within a few decades, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed by the Romans.

Others interpret this parable as stressing the urgency of repentance before it is too late. Pilate killed some individuals, who were no better or worse than others. The tower of Siloam fell upon and randomly killed eighteen people who were on or near it. Contrary to the common belief at the time that such things happened to people because of their sins, Jesus made the point that these people's deaths weren't due to sin. Instead, according to this interpretation, He was pointing out that life is fragile and unpredictable, and therefore it is important for everyone to repent and not to wait.



Both interpretations fit. Jesus made the point that each person will give an accounting of their life to God—and that no one knows when that time will come.

It's helpful for us as Christians to understand that each day is a gift of God's mercy. We live by His grace, and therefore we should seek to live according to His Word to the best of our abilities. We will, of course, fall short, and when we do, we should ask His forgiveness—praying as He taught us to:
Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. (Matthew 6:12)



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