

# Sermons on Matthew

## The Withering Fig Tree

*Matthew 21:18-22*

*Part 2*

*With Study Questions*

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Part 2

Now in the morning, as He returned to the city, He was hungry. <sup>-19-</sup> \_\_And seeing a fig tree by the road, He came to it and found nothing on it but leaves, and said to it, “\_Let no fruit grow on you ever again.” Immediately the fig tree withered away.

<sup>-20-</sup> \_\_And when the disciples saw *it*, they marveled, saying, “\_How did the fig tree wither away so soon?\_”

<sup>-21-</sup> So Jesus answered and said to them, “\_Assuredly, I say to you, \_\_if you have faith and \_\_do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, \_\_but also if you say to this mountain, ‘\_Be removed and be cast into the sea,‘ it will be done.

<sup>-22-</sup> And \_\_whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive” (Matthew 21:18-22)\_.

## Review

In our present context the fig tree served as a symbol of bad religion – dead religion, giving a false hope for peace with God through an impracticable or unfeasible method, i.e. human effort or works righteousness.

There are few things more pernicious than a religion of false hopes and promises. It was an act of supreme grace for Jesus to curse this fig tree and have it wither away. The fig tree was already ruined. Jesus merely made it evident that it had not fruit. No hungry person would now mistake this tree as a source of nourishment.

God is gracious and powerful. His love for humanity is evident in that He will not suffer the lies to prevail for long. In our present context it is Israel that the fig tree represents. But we can be confident that He will continue to overcome the powers that take rank against Him and His Anointed One throughout history (Psalm 2).

This is why it is critical for us to continue to preach Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2) since that is the means by which God redeems the world and protects mankind from the vain thinking that would shipwreck their souls.

## Greater Works

In the second portion of this passage Jesus informs His disciples that they, in some respect, will continue to do what He had just done. And there is a feel in the passage that they will do even more. In a similar passage we read,

**Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater *works* than these he will do, because I go to My Father. <sup>-13-</sup> \_\_And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be \_\_glorified in the Son. <sup>-14-</sup> If you \_\_ask anything in My name, I will do *it* (John 14:12-14).**

Of course this begs the question, ‘in what respect will the followers of Jesus do greater (*meizona* – from the verb *meigas*) works than Jesus?’ I hasten to say that this should not be viewed as some sort of qualitative superiority; that is we shouldn’t expect individuals to be feeding five thousand with a few loaves and fish, raising the dead or halting storms (which were always secondary aspects of Jesus ministry). We should, though, expect greater works in a quantitative sense, that the gospel of Christ will transform the world.

**And when the disciples saw *it*, they marveled, saying, “\_How did the fig tree wither away so soon?\_” -So Jesus answered and said to them, “\_Assuredly, I say to you, \_\_if you have faith and \_\_do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, \_\_but also if you say to this mountain, ‘\_Be removed and be cast into the sea,\_' it will be done (Matthew 21:20-21).**

## Casting Mountains

What do we make of this ‘casting mountains into the sea’ comment? Even Jesus didn’t cast a mountain into the sea. Some suggest that it refers to Mt. Sinai with its “**fiery law**” (Deuteronomy 33:2) and “**bondage**” (Galatians 4:25). There is great theological merit to this position since Jesus surely does deliver us from the “**law of sin and death**” (Romans 8:2) that Sinai came to represent.

## Mount of Olives

But there is another mountain in sight – the Mount of Olives.

Matthew mentions this mountain at the very beginning of the activities of Jesus in Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1). The Mount of Olives is the location where Jesus delivers the great Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24:3). And it is the Mount of Olives that the apostles **“went out to” (Matthew 26:30)** after Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper on the night He was betrayed.

The Mount of Olives is significant when considering its Old Testament usage. Zechariah (who had written of Jesus coming to Jerusalem on a Donkey – Zechariah 9:9) writes of Jesus placing His feet on the Mount of Olives on the **“day of the Lord”** (see Acts 2:20) at which time the Mount splits **“in two”**. He then associates that day with the worldwide spread of the gospel, or more specifically the **“living waters”** which the New Testament reveals is given by Jesus (John 4:10, 11; 7:38).

These **“living waters”** according to Zechariah will flow to the **“eastern sea”** and **“western sea”** in **“summer”** and in **“winter”** and the **“Lord shall be King over all the earth.”**

This passage in Zechariah contains both references to the judgment of Israel – which Jesus illustrated by destroying the fig tree – and the subsequent spread of the gospel which Jesus begins to commission His disciples with in our present passage by speaking of casting down mountains.

**Behold, \_\_the day of the Lord is coming, and your \_\_spoil will be divided in your midst. <sup>2</sup> For \_\_I will gather all the nations to battle against Jerusalem; the city shall be taken, The houses \_\_rifled, and the women ravished. Half of the city shall go into captivity, but the remnant of the people shall not be cut off from the city.**

**<sup>3</sup> Then the Lord will go forth and fight against those nations, as He fights in the day of battle. <sup>4</sup> And in that day His feet will stand \_\_on the Mount of Olives, which faces Jerusalem on the east. And the Mount of Olives shall be split in two, from east to west, *\_making* a very large valley; half of**

the mountain shall move toward the north and half of it toward the south. <sup>5</sup> Then you shall flee *through* My mountain valley, for the mountain valley shall reach to Azal. Yes, you shall flee as you fled from the \_\_earthquake in the days of Uzziah king of Judah.

\_Thus the Lord my God will come, *and* \_\_all the saints with \_\_You.

<sup>6</sup> It shall come to pass in that day *that* there will be no light; the \_\_lights will diminish. <sup>7</sup> It shall be one day \_which is known to the Lord neither day nor night. But at \_\_evening time it shall happen *that* it will be light.

<sup>8</sup> And in that day it shall be – *that* living \_\_waters shall flow from Jerusalem, half of them toward \_\_the eastern sea and half of them toward \_\_the western sea; in both summer and winter it shall occur. <sup>9</sup> And the Lord shall be \_\_King over all the earth. In that day it shall be \_The Lord *is* one,\_" and His name one (Zechariah 14:1-9).

## Worldwide Spread of the Gospel

This should not surprise due to the numerous promises in Scripture regarding the worldwide redeeming affect of the gospel. Abraham was promised that through His seed "**all the families of the earth shall be blessed**" (Genesis 12:3 – Paul associates that with Gospel in Galatians 3:8).

We see similar promises in the Psalms:

\_He shall have dominion also from sea to sea, And from the River to the ends of the earth (Psalm 72:8).

All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the \_\_nations shall worship before \_You. <sup>28</sup> \_For the kingdom *is* the Lord's, and He rules over the nations.

<sup>29</sup> \_All the prosperous of the earth shall eat and worship; \_all those who go down to \_the dust shall bow before Him, even he who cannot keep himself alive. <sup>30</sup> A posterity shall serve Him. It will be recounted of the Lord to the *next* generation,

<sup>31</sup> they will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born, that He has done this (Psalm 22:27-31).

God be merciful to us and bless us, *and* \_cause His face to shine upon us, <sup>2</sup> that \_Your way may be known on earth, \_your salvation among all nations.

<sup>3</sup> Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. <sup>4</sup> Oh, let the nations be glad and sing for joy! For \_You shall judge the people righteously, and govern the nations on earth.

<sup>5</sup> Let the peoples praise You, O God; let all the peoples praise You. <sup>6</sup> \_Then the earth shall \_\_yield her increase; God, our own God, shall bless us. <sup>7</sup> God shall bless us, and all the ends of the earth shall fear Him (Psalm 67:1-7).

In Zechariah:

“\_Thus says the Lord of hosts:

‘\_Peoples shall yet come, inhabitants of many cities; <sup>21</sup> the inhabitants of one *city* shall go to another, saying, “\_Let us continue to go and pray before the Lord, and seek the Lord of hosts. I myself will go also.” <sup>22</sup> Yes, \_\_many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Lord of hosts in Jerusalem, and to pray before the Lord.’ <sup>23</sup> “\_Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘\_In those days ten men \_\_from every language of the nations shall \_\_grasp the \_\_sleeve of a Jewish man, saying, “\_Let us go with you, for we have heard \_\_*that* God is with you\_” (Zechariah 8:20-22).

In Micah:

Now \_\_it shall come to pass in the latter days *that* the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it. <sup>2</sup> Many nations shall come and say, “\_Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we

shall walk in His paths.” For out of Zion the law shall go forth,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Micah 4:1-3).

And there are numerous other Old Testament references to what will happen as a result of Jesus.

And the New Testament is not silent regarding the expansion of Christ’s kingdom.

In Luke:

Then He said to them, “ Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, <sup>-47-</sup> and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. <sup>-48-</sup> And you are witnesses of these things (Luke 24:46-48).

In John:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who <sup>1</sup> will believe in Me through their word; <sup>-21-</sup> that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. <sup>-22-</sup> And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: <sup>-23-</sup> I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me (John 17:20-23).

In Matthew:

**\_Go \_therefore and \_make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, <sup>-20-</sup> \_\_teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am \_\_with you always, even to the end of the age.\_" \_\_Amen (Matthew 28:19, 20).**

In the Revelation:

**Then \_the seventh angel sounded: \_\_And there were loud voices in heaven, saying, \_\_" \_The \_\_kingdoms of this world have become *the kingdoms* of our Lord and of His Christ, \_\_and He shall reign forever and ever\_" (Revelation 11:15)!**

I find myself very much in agreement with the 17<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterian, Matthew Henry:

**The gospel shall spread into all parts of the world, into some that lie remote from Jerusalem one way and others that lie as far off another way; for the dominion of the Redeemer, which was thereby to be set up, must be *from sea to sea* (Ps. 72:8), and the earth must be *full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea*, and as the waters that in various channels run to the sea.<sup>1</sup>**

He goes on to say,

***The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ. (2.) It shall be a united kingdom: There shall be one Lord, and his name one. All shall worship one God only, and not idols, and shall be unanimous in the worship of him. All false gods shall be abandoned, and all false ways of worship abolished; and as God shall be the centre of their unity, in whom they shall all meet, so the scripture shall be the rule of their unity, by which they shall all walk.***<sup>2-</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Zec 14:8). Peabody: Hendrickson.

<sup>2</sup>Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Zec 14:8). Peabody: Hendrickson.

## Other Views

Fellow Christians of various eschatological persuasions would tend to disagree with this optimistic view of the effects of the gospel. Dispensationalists view all these promises as literally coming to pass but not until the Second Coming.

**When He establishes His millennial kingdom, He will be universally recognized as such and worshiped as the one true God (Rev. 21:3).<sup>3</sup>**

They maintain this even though no biblical evidence allows for a gap between the cross and the events which are brought about as a result of the cross. Isaiah 9:6-7, for example, speaks of the birth of the child followed by the growth and victory of His kingdom without any mention of a second advent.

Others who, I believe, are more biblically and historically orthodox tend to spiritualize the victorious nature of these passages in a sort of realized eschatology. In other words, all of the promises were completely fulfilled when Christ ascended. But this tends to neglect the incremental and generational nature of the promises. For example, the kingdom growing like a rising stream or a stone becoming a mountain or leaven or a mustard seed or the blessing moving from generation to generation (Psalm 22:30).

## Answered Prayer

Some may say I have pushed this passage too far. But when Jesus tells His apostles that they will cast mountains into the sea, the language is strong and full of impact.

And though we often use the following verse (and others like it)

**-And \_\_ whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive (Matthew 21:18-22).**

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<sup>3</sup>Walvoord, J. F. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (Zec 14:9). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

as a sort of magic wand (usually wondering why the magic is not working for us), the context for the promise of great things coming through prayer is the advancement of Christ's kingdom – and who can deny that God has answered these prayers?

### **What Difference Does it Make?**

And what difference does all this make?

In the grand scheme it makes a difference because Christians ought to know God's plan of redeeming the world and the scope and means of that redemption.

As James Henley Thornwell (1812-62) stated,

**If the Church could be aroused to a deeper sense of the glory that awaits her, she would enter with a warmer spirit into the struggles that are before her.<sup>4</sup>**

And although we must recognize that the heart of this redemption is the word and the sacraments – the preaching of Christ and Him crucified – we must not exclude the fact that God, through redeemed hearts, opens doors, relieves oppression, protects the righteous, and judges tyranny and cruelty.

It is my opinion that dispensationalism tacitly, if not openly, dedicates Christ's people to social and cultural failure, while many even in the Reformed camp, though tipping their hats to cultural change, view history as so utterly trivial that they become committed to insignificance.

In the smaller scheme the promise from Jesus of God's judgment of evil and success of the gospel encourages me, as a pastor, to continue to preach the gospel knowing that my work in the Lord **"is not in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:58)** – a promise that all Christians cling to.

It is designed to encourage my wife as she dedicates her heart to raising our children in the instruction and admonition of the Lord, knowing that even though there are peaks and valleys to the advancement

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<sup>4</sup> Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism, An Eschatology of Hope*, (P & R Publishing, 1999), p. 47.

of Christ's kingdom, the Lord will honor her efforts and there will be ultimate victory even in the face of adversity.

Christ's promise of victory in history is a source of encouragement for those who work in venues of ridicule and scorn. Our hearts are buttressed when it appears that the wicked have won the day to know that victory is short-lived. The Lord has not given history over to the devil.

Missionaries work toward, and expect, their fields to be redeemed in every conceivable way – for they make disciples, baptize and teach all Christ has commanded (Matthew 28:19, 20).

Knowing God's plan for history is important because we then know how we are to work toward that plan.

Yet at the same time eschatology (for this is the subject before us) is a supremely selfless source of encouragement. For the promises are neither immediate nor individual in nature. We must be willing, like the Christians of the first three centuries and like our brothers and sisters who preach the gospel in the face of life-threatening obstacles today, to know that, even though our victory in Christ is secured and belongs to us now and forever, the transformation of history is a slow and costly process.

And the only true means by which that redemption and transformation takes place is the proclamation – the heralding – of the gospel of Jesus Christ – that He came to save sinners – to bear our iniquity on the cross and present us holy and without blame before our Maker. The only true means by which redemption and transformation takes place is that which we will now embark upon, the loaf and the cup.

And we pray that God will honor Himself in these and all things.

## Questions for Study

1. What does the fig tree in verse 19 and 20 represent (page 2)?
2. What are the “greater works” that the followers of Jesus will do (page 3)?
3. Why is the Mount of Olives significant (pages 4, 5)?
4. What does God promise will happen as a result of the gospel (pages 5-8)?
5. What are some other views regarding the success of the gospel and what are their strengths and weaknesses (page 9)?
6. What is the context of having our prayers answered in this passage (pages 9, 10)?
7. What difference does this all make (pages 10, 11)?
8. What is the heart of redemption (page 11)?