**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**21. THE CURSING OF THE FIG-TREE**

*"Now in the morning, as he returned to the city, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree by the road, he came to it, and found nothing on it but leaves. He said to it, "Let there be no fruit from you forever!" Immediately the fig tree withered away. When the disciples saw it, they marvelled, saying, "How did the fig tree immediately wither away?" Jesus answered them, "Most certainly I tell you, if you have faith, and don't doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but even if you told this mountain, 'Be taken up and cast into the sea,' it would be done. All things, whatever you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive."*

*Matthew 21:18-22*

IN THE chronological sequence of the life of Jesus we now reach a new realm in His teaching and work. This incident of the cursing of the fig-tree, and the remainder of the parables and parabolic illustrations in Matthew, were uttered in the last days of His life on earth.

He had now arrived in Jerusalem for the final scenes, and it is important that we recognize at the beginning that His teaching was largely denunciatory, and His actions administrative. By this time His teaching to the crowd and the multitudes generally was over. Presently He would gather His own disciples around Him, and give them His final teaching. His actions now were administrative, the actions of a full and supreme authority.

What we celebrate and call Palm Sunday, and speak of as the triumphal entry of Jesus to Jerusalem, was really a threefold entry on three separate days. Mark tells the story of His first coming. It was on a Sabbath day when He entered the Temple, and looked round about upon all things, and said nothing. He turned His back, and went out. On the next day, our Sunday, the first day of the week in the Jewish calendar, He came again, and cleansed the Temple. When He first entered the traffickers were not there. It was the Sabbath. They had taken their places again on the next day, when He cleansed the Temple. Then on the Monday, their second day of the week, He came again, and that was the great and dramatic day of controversy with the rulers. That word is used with care and determination. It was a dramatic day. There is nothing in the life of our Lord comparable to it in certain respects. It was a day in which He, though rejected by the rulers, chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees, nevertheless entered the city and the Temple, gathered those men about Him, and compelled them to find verdicts on their own condition, and pass sentences on their own failure. That is a summary of events, details of which we come to in the parabolic illustrations. In these days this cursing of the fig-tree occurred, which was unquestionably a parabolic act, and concerning which our Lord gave an interpretation. The whole paragraph must be taken in its entirety, against its background, to understand the things I have referred to as existing.

We see at the beginning of the chapter how Jesus had now come up to Jerusalem for the official rejection of the Hebrew people; not their rejection of Him, but His rejection of them. If we study carefully that story of the threefold entry, we shall find He entered in every aspect of authority. He entered as the King, as Prophet, as Priest. All through the story we see the august and splendid and glorious dignity of Jesus. Oh, yes, His enemies were there in their robes and their phylacteries, all opposed to Him; but He moved with majesty into the midst of them, and dealt with them until there fell from His lips that final sentence addressed to the nation through the rulers, "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." That nation was then rejected from the office it had held for the interpretation and revelation of the meaning of the Kingdom of God. They were rejected, and the Kingdom was taken from them, because they had failed to bring forth fruit. The Kingdom of God was taken from them, and given to a nation that should bring forth the fruits of that Kingdom.

After the entry on that first day, and the cleansing of the Temple on the second day, having spent the night in Bethany, He returned to Jerusalem, and on the way He destroyed the fig-tree.

This action had created difficulty in the minds of many. One is almost amused at the way some people seem to be puzzled. The rank and file seem to understand it better than the expositors. Going over expository literature it is interesting to find what difficulty has been created. We must bear in mind this is the only miracle of judgment that Jesus wrought. We may say, What about the destruction of the swine, when they swept down the steep place into the sea? Yes, that is certainly true, but in the case of the Gadarene swine, the objective was not judgment, but the delivery of a man. There was judgment incidentally. But this was a case in which Jesus, passing along, exhibited His power to destroy, not to save; and it is the only case on record. There can be no doubt whatever that it was a parabolic action, especially if we put ourselves back into the mental mood of the disciples who were with Him; and with all reverence, into His own mental mood. When He destroyed that fig-tree, there were wider meanings in the action than the mere destruction of the tree.

Let us look at the story a little carefully in two ways, first facing these difficulties, and then enquiring what were the immediate and permanent values of this action of Jesus, according to His own interpretation of it to His disciples.

Three difficulties have been suggested. First, that His action in destroying that tree was an act of injustice. Mark tells us, "It was not the season of figs." People have fastened upon that, and have said if it was not the season of figs, it was an act of injustice to destroy the tree, because no figs were on it.

Then it has been objected that it was an angry action, because He was hungry. He was hungry, and no figs were there; and so in anger He smote the tree with His power, and destroyed it. It is interesting to see people think that was wrong. One wonders where they learned it was wrong, if they did not know Jesus! The very objection grows out of a consciousness of the mind and the heart of Jesus. Still there is the objection which has been definitely raised.

The third objection is that it is not in harmony with His methods as they have been revealed.

We need not tarry with these objections. First of all, the charge that it was an act of injustice. What are the facts about these fig-trees? The usual time of figs there in the East was certainly June, and I think we can say, without any argument, this cursing happened in the month of April; so Mark says it was not the time of figs, not the time of the full usual harvest of figs. But there was a kind of first ripe fig, before the time of figs, often found on certain fig-trees. In the prophecy of Isaiah, in the course of the twenty-eighth chapter, describing the desolation that is coming, he said, "The crown of the pride of the drunkards of Ephraim shall be trodden under foot; and the fading flower of his glorious beauty, which is on the head of the fat valley, shall be as the first ripe fig before the summer; which when he looketh upon it seeth, while it is yet in his hand he eateth it up." That is an allusion to a fact of Nature, with which all dwellers in that land were familiar. On certain fig-trees ripe figs were found before the summer, which was the time of figs; and whenever figs were so found, it was before the leaves appeared, when the trees were just burgeoning out. The figs were found growing on the stems and on the branches, before the leaves came.

But when Jesus came to this fig-tree, He found nothing but leaves. There should have been no leaves at all. It was a false development, so there were leaves, but no fruit. It was a tree of false development. The leaves suggested its fruitfulness, but no fruit was there. There the tree grew by the wayside as they travelled along. Jesus, being hungry, came up to it, and looked at it. Leaves were on the tree before the time, but no fruit; a false development of show and appearance, with no reality of fruitfulness. It was upon that condition that our Lord based His word, "Let there be no fruit from thee henceforward forever"; and at the word of authority, the tree immediately withered away. So much for the charge of injustice, It was the cursing and destruction of a tree that had failed.

What about this suggestion of anger? There is not a sign of personal vindictiveness in the whole story. Notice carefully a simple matter, but it is important. The disciples were not surprised at the effect produced upon that tree. They were surprised at the quickness, the suddenness of it. That is what amazed them. There was no suggestion on their part that such a tree should be destroyed; but that with the spoken word, the leaves withered and crumpled, and the tree was dead. That is what amazed them, the speed with which it was carried out. There is no suggestiveness of the vindictiveness of Jesus, but the astonishment of the disciples. The tree was faulty, a failure; but they were surprised at the swiftness of the judgment.

Again we are told that the action of destroying that tree was not according to the methods of Jesus. Let us think again before we say that. So many people have the idea that our Lord is known only as the meek and lowly Jesus. He was meek. He said so. He was lowly. He claimed to be so. But He was infinitely more. He was majestic with a majesty that appals us the nearer we get to Him, and His wrath was terrific when it blazed forth in words that at the distance of nearly two millenniums scorch us as we read them. We remember when He read Himself in, at the synagogue in Nazareth, He read, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me. …" We have all noticed where He stopped. He ended with the words, "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." Then He closed the book and sat down. If we open the book, the Hebrew version, we are not helped very much; but if we take our English Version, and open the book, where He stopped there is a comma, and nothing more. What is the next sentence? "The day of vengeance of our God." That is the whole prophecy concerning Him. The Spirit of the Lord was upon Him to preach the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God. To be quite technical, only a comma, but that marks a pause of at least 1940 years. That day of vengeance has not come. It is coming. Some of us seem to see the clouds sweeping up the sky now. It is coming, the day of vengeance. But in the method of Christ, there is not only the acceptable year of the Lord; there is the day of vengeance.

Take another illustration from Matthew, where the quotation is made concerning Him. It is said, "A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench," and we constantly quote that to show the gentleness of His method. We have no right to do so. Finish the quotation.

"A bruised reed shall He not break, and smoking flax shall He not quench, till He send forth judgment unto victory." The acceptable year of the Lord is the day of His grace. The day of vengeance of God is the day when He will break the bruised reed, and quench the smoking flax. Do not think falsely about the methods of Jesus. For a moment here there flamed into the view of His disciples a retributive act of Jesus in the realm of the material, as He cursed that fig-tree.

What did it mean? We need to take the whole paragraph, and to notice first of all His condition. In the morning He returned to the city, and "He hungered." How do we interpret that? He had been in Bethany, which may not necessarily mean that He was in the town of Bethany, but in the neighbourhood. During that last week in the life of our Lord, He never slept in Jerusalem. He went up there on successive days, but at night He left the city, and went away into loneliness. Martha, Mary, and Lazarus were in Bethany, and we can hardly conceive of His coming back from that hospitable home hungry on the physical level.

Yet I think He was hungry on the physical level, which was a symbol of a deeper hunger possessing Him, the hunger for the doing of the will of God, the hunger for the redemption of humanity; yes, let us say the drastic thing, the desire, the hunger for His Cross. He knew the failure of the nation, and the reason of their failure. He knew that they had now become apparently a fair fig-tree - to use the figure which was one of the symbols of the nation - but He knew also that upon that fig-tree leaves were flourishing, but fruit was absent. He was hungry, hungry for the things of God, hungering for the accomplishment of the Divine purpose. The material hunger was there, but in the perfect unity of His Personality, the material hunger was the sacramental symbol of the spiritual hunger.

Then He found that fig-tree, saw its unutterable failure, and He cursed it, and destroyed it. He did that which was a strange thing. Strange? Yea, verily. I go back once more to Isaiah to the twenty-eighth chapter at the twenty-first verse. The prophet is still speaking of the judgments to fall, and he said this, "For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, He shall 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." What? Judgment, destruction, the strange act of God. That is something foreign to the desire and the heart of God. God willeth not the death of any sinner. That does not prevent the death of the soul that fails. "His strange act." Jesus is walking towards Jerusalem on one of His last journeys, and there is a false tree, emblem of the nation; and He acted in "His strange act." He was on His way to national judgment, which the next two parables will make clear.

Look again, and notice that when this was done, the disciples spoke to Him, and they said, "How did the fig-tree immediately wither away?" Notice, not, Why didst Thou do this? but, What brought about that strange swiftness of result?

The Lord did not answer that enquiry. He did not tell them how He had done it, but He did reveal why He had done it, and He did reveal what the principle was, that found illustration in that destructive act:

"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. And all things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."

We ask, Where is the connection? It is in the revelation of the reason of the failure of the nation. He had now passed away from the fig-tree. There the tree stood, withered, blighted, blasted; because it gave a false appearance which was untrue to reality. There it was, and while the disciples were wondering at the power that had wrought so swift a destruction, He took them to the heart of the trouble He was facing. What was it? Why had that nation failed? For lack of faith in God. He took those simple words, and yet so sublime, telling them that if they had faith and doubted not, it would not be a withered fig-tree, but a mountain in front of them, barring progress, which could be moved into the sea, "All things, whatsoever ye shall ask in prayer, believing, ye shall receive."

Then He revealed the principle. Lacking faith, the nation was perishing, notwithstanding its outward appearance of life. Possessing faith, though everything seemed to be against them, they might come to power. The cursing of the fig-tree and the destruction was a parabolic and symbolic act, and our Lord interpreted it to us.

As we consider this story, we are impressed with the absolute oneness of Christ with God; and we see His ministry of mercy merging into one of judgment. But that judgment is exercised in strictest justice, vindicated by mercy. The power in which His own followers are to cast out the obstacles which are in the way of God's coming into His Kingdom is that of faith. Men of faith co-operate with God and God operates through men of faith.